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ルトニを車窓から
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Allison III(Part 1): See the Lutoni by Train

Written by Keiichi Sigsawa
Illustration by Kouhaku Kuroboshi

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Design by Yoshihiko Kamabe

フィオナ（フランチェスカ）

二十歳。東側連邦の一国、イクス王国の王家の生き残りにして次期女王の予定。ヴィルとアリソン、そしてベネディクトの活躍で国民の前に姿を現す。

カー・ベネディクト

二十五歳。ベゼル・イルトア王国連合（西側）空軍最年少の少佐、腕のいい戦闘機乗り。“歴史的発見の英雄”であり世界一の有名人。女性に大人気だが、本人は非常に不満。ちなみにカーが名字。

ヴィルヘルム・シュルツ

十七歳。東側のラプトア共和国、ロウ・スネイアム記念上級学校六年生。のんびり屋で成績は優秀。三歳の時、親によって孤児院に捨てられた。その五年後以来、アリソンの幼なじみにして子分――もとい、信頼できる部下、もしくは。

アリソン・ウィッティングトン

十七歳。ロクシアーヌク連邦（東側）空軍伍長、飛行機移送部隊所属の飛行士。金髪碧眼。健康かつ身体能力抜群だが寝起き悪し。行動は一見無茶無謀。八歳で父親を戦争で亡くし、孤児院に引き取られてヴィルと出会った。

Allison Whittington: 17 years old. A staff sergeant in the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. She is part of an aircraft transportation unit. Allison has blond hair and blue eyes, and is extremely athletic. However, she is not a morning person. Allison often acts without thinking. She lost her father in battle when she was eight years old, at which point she was brought to the orphanage where she met Wil.

Wilhelm Schultz: 17 years old. A sixth-year student at Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School in the Republic of Raputoa on the east side of the river. Wil is a laid-back student with an excellent academic record, who was abandoned at an orphanage at the age of three. Since the age of eight, he has been Allison's friend, underling, trustworthy subordinate, and maybe even her—

Carr Benedict: 24 years old. The youngest major in the history of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. He is known as a hero who made a historic discovery. Benedict is extremely popular with women, but he is less than pleased with his newfound stardom. 'Carr' is his family name.

Fiona(**Francesca**): 20 years old. A princess of the Kingdom of Iks, which is a part of the Roxcheanuk Confederation on the east side of the river. She is the only surviving member of the Royal Family of Iks, and is set to become the queen. She revealed her survival to the people of her country with the help of Wil, Allison, and Benedict.

Before the Prologue - a

Crash!

My name is Lillia Schultz. Lillia is my given name, and Schultz is my family name.

Everyone calls me 'Lillia', but my full name is 'Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz'. It's ridiculously long. That's why I only end up using the whole thing once a year or so. In Roxche—the Roxcheanuk Confederation—not many people have middle names, so everyone who hears my full name asks me what it all means.

I always explain that it comes from an old custom in the West—the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa—where you put the names of both parents and your grandparents into your name. People either get it or look surprised. Some people are astonished.

I was born and raised in the Special Capital District(Capital District for short).

I've lived in the same apartment building and room since I was born. Our place is at the very top floor of a cluster of five-story apartments filling the Capital District's residential district.

Until the Historic Architecture Protection Law was amended and elevators were installed in even the oldest apartment buildings, apartment buildings were extremely cheap because climbing the stairs was such a hassle. That was why they were so popular with young people.

"That's why we rented this place. We're still crashing here because moving is such a hassle."

That was what Mom said. She's asleep right now. That crash just now was the sound of Mom chucking the poor, hardworking alarm clock against the wall.

So, as usual, I decided to go wake her myself.

I turned off the electric toaster, put breakfast on our plates, and left the kitchen. The bricks lining the hall were chipped everywhere, showing signs of age. I went into Mom's room. I didn't get permission to enter. I couldn't get it even if I wanted to, since she was still asleep.

The room faced east, and the window was installed with thin curtains on purpose. The morning sun was bright. But Mom was lying face-down on her bed, still in her pajamas. She was sleeping with her golden hair covering her face. As usual, her blanket was crumpled on the floor and her pillow was on top of her feet. If she weren't sleeping in a double bed, she would have fallen by now. Her right arm, in fact, was already dangling off the side of the mattress.

First, I picked up the poor, abused alarm clock from by the door and put it back on the shelf. It was the latest model—the hands and batteries were impact-resistant—and expensive to boot. But it was lasting a surprisingly long time for a clock in Mom's room. It really is a miracle.

“It’s morning, Mom. Wake up.” I tried saying, glancing at the clock on the wall. If Mom woke up just like that, it would rain cats and dogs and hell would freeze over. And I’d stay bundled up inside.

As usual, there was no response. I went around the bed and up to Mom’s shoulder. Her left side, today.

Squatting by the bed, I grabbed Mom’s shoulders as she lay facedown.

“Wake up!” I shouted, shaking her hard enough to pull off her shoulders. I showed her no mercy.

The bed shook and squeaked irritatingly.

“It’s! Morning! Mom! Wake! Up! Wake! Up! Now!” I yelled.

About nineteen seconds of shaking later.

“Mmm?”

A reaction. Mom is still alive today. I stopped shaking her.

“Mmm…”

With a groan, Mom slowly raised her head. She stared at me—I was still holding her shoulders—through her messy hair. Her clear blue eyes were still half-covered by her eyelids.

“Who’re you?” She asked. Still not awake.

I came up with an answer. Take this.

“This is the Confederation Police Force. You’re under arrest for using an Air Force aeroplane without permission to teach your daughter to fly, using two hundred liters of gasoline without permission, and falsifying a ground run of an engine test to justify the use of gasoline. What do you have to say to that?”

“C’mon, Officer. It’s all for the noble goal of raising the next generation of pilots.” Mom slurred, still half-asleep. “As long as no one finds out. Right, Officer?”

If I were a cop, I would have arrested her on the spot. If a cop’s come to see you, he obviously knows about your rampant personal use of military assets.

“Bye-bye.”

I gave up. Mom buried her face in the mattress and began snoozing away again in the same pose as before. Because she had shifted slightly, she was now lying very close to the edge of the bed.

That was it. The switch was pressed.

I got up and waited for the engine in Mom’s head to warm up. And I aimlessly looked around her room.

There was no dust on the floor; I cleaned the room yesterday. There wasn't a single fallen leaf by the flowerpot. The big dresser caught my eye. Mom'd been talking about moving it to the north-side wall for days, but she still hadn't done it. On the clothes hanger by the dresser was the boring dark-red uniform of the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force, top and bottom side-by-side. She must have gotten them ready last night. Women could wear pants or a skirt; today, she was going to wear a skirt.

On the collar of her top was a badge of rank with three stripes—three stripes for the rank of captain. Over the left breast was a square, multicolored embroidered patch. Over the right breast was embroidered her name. Of course, it read 'Schultz'.

On the oaken desk was a small electric lamp and an oak bookshelf. There were difficult flight theory books, and a thick book of fairy tales from the West that I'd never seen her read.

And a picture frame.

It was a pretty silver frame. There was a color photograph inside, slightly yellowed with age.

There are two people in the picture. They were shot from the knees-up, but the angle is wonky—it looks like the picture was taken looking down at them.

One of them is wearing a thin yellow dress, looking like a lady from a rich family. She has an awesome and confident smile, and has long blond hair and blue eyes. Mom, when she was younger.

Next to her is a boy with light brown hair, who's wearing a school jacket and uniform. He must have moved his head when the picture was taken, because his face is a complete blur. It kind of looks like he's nervous. The backdrop is the platform of a train station. I can see a dark sky, a hazy green forest, and a station sign that's written in Roxchean but only the first part is visible. It looks like a 'Ka', but I have no idea where that is.

The boy is Dad—Wilhelm Schultz—when he was younger.

It's the only picture of the two of them together—in fact, it's the only photo of Dad, period.

"Mmm…? Hmm…"

I turned to the bed, where Mom was mumbling.

"Mmm…"

All of a sudden, she got up. She lost her balance and fell back-first on the floor. There was a loud noise.

"Huh…? What?"

I could hear her voice from across the mattress.

"It's morning, Mom. You're going to be late." I replied coldly.

Mom raised her head from behind the bed with a pout. She shot me a glare.

"You're awful, Lillia… You know, your father used to wake me up every morning with a kiss. He used to stroke my hair and wait next to me until I woke up."

I guarantee you that that is a lie.

"How do you know that?"

"I didn't say anything, Mom. Anyway, you have to wash up, brush your hair, and eat breakfast. You're going to be late. You said you're going to get a pay cut if you're tardy again, right? I'm not going to the command center for you even if they call. It's embarrassing."

"All right, all right."

Who's the mother around here, anyway? I sighed.

"And you said you're going to have lunch with Mr. Hero today, right?"

"Hm? Did I?"

This is ridiculous. She's the one who pranced home last night and announced it as soon as she stepped through the door.

"Oh, right! That's right. I'd better dress up nicely."

Sleep completely chased from her, Mom leapt over the bed.

"Good morning, Lillia. You're looking as lovely as usual."

Planting a kiss on my cheek, she rushed into the bathroom.

I went back to the kitchen, brewed tea for both of us, and ate breakfast first. It tasted delicious.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Mom said as she emerged, although I hadn't waited for her. She was in full Air Force regalia. It was hard to believe that she was the same person who was half-asleep in pajamas in her bed until just earlier. Captain Allison Whittington Schultz of the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. A female test pilot who's the undisputed no.1 in the Confederation. What a flawless transformation. This is how she fools the taxpayers who support her.

With a 'Thanks for the meal', Mom began eating. I observed her as I sipped my tea.

She had clear blue eyes as beautiful as the sky on a winter morning. And strands of hair that glinted like fine strings of gold.

"Hm? Wha iff iff?" Mom asked with a sandwich in her mouth, noticing my gaze.

"Well. I just kind of wished I could have gotten those from you."

"'Those'?"

"Your eye and hair colors."

Mom nodded in understanding and gulped down her tea.

"It's all right, Lillia. You have Wil's eyes and hair. And that's the biggest proof that you're his daughter."

The same answer as usual. And nothing more. I held up the teapot.

"More tea?"

"Sure."

"Make sure to lock up when you leave. Don't be late for school." Mom said, skipping out the door.

For someone who had the gall to say to her commander, *"Days without flights are too boring, sir. To be perfectly honest, I want to make up excuses and skip work those days"*, she was pretty cheerful.

She'd also once said, *"I wonder if there's going to be an accident on the way to work. Then maybe I could use the traffic jam as an excuse…"*, but today, she's going to rev up the engine on her beloved car, drive through the packed Capital District streets, and race down the autobahn.

That's all thanks to the date she has scheduled with Mr. Hero.

He's Mom's boyfriend. Of course, 'Hero' isn't his name. I don't know where the nickname came from—Mom never told me.

A long time ago, Roxche was involved in a stupid(from my perspective, having been born after the war) conflict with Sou Be-Il over who was the ancestor of humanity. Mr. Hero is from Sou Be-Il, and he's working at the embassy in the Capital District. He's something called a 'military attaché'—he's around Mom's age, but he's a rank higher than her at major. According to Mom, he's one of the super-elite. Straight from the cream of the crop.

He came to visit us at home a few times when I was little. I still sort of remember the last time he came over. Mom was sitting in a chair drinking tea, giving him orders as he moved the dresser. She was lording it over him like he was her underling or subordinate.

"Is he a 'nobody'?" I'd asked Mom while he was right there. Mom was astonished, but at the same time she sounded impressed.

"Oh my, Lillia. Where did you learn that word?"

Now that I think about it, that was really rude of me. I still remember how Mr. Hero was smiling bitterly. Mom answered,

"Mr. Hero here's fallen head over heels for me, and he owes me a lot. So I can order him around as much as I'd like, whenever and wherever. Isn't that useful? I'm going to boss him around forever."

Now that I think about it, that's unbelievable. I wonder what Dad would say if he were still alive?

That’s right. Dad’s already gone—he passed away a little while before I was born.

I heard that he got into an accident while he was on his way to the West for some business. Apparently he fell off a luxury train while it was passing through the mountains.

They never found his body.

"It's dirty work. Only a gentleman can carry it out."
That was what I learned, and that was what I believed.

I betrayed many people, and sometimes I threw them away.
I made many shed tears, and sometimes I killed them.

I loved my country, and my country loved me.
I gave my all for my country, and my country paid me back in full.

I love my country. Even if my country does not love me.
I give my all for my country. Even if my country does not pay me back in full.

But—

How did it come to this?

How
did it come to this?

Oh, Goddess of Fortune.
You cruel and fickle mistress.

I will not lose.
I will use any means necessary.

Now, think.
Think.
Think.

What use is that head of yours?
To display hats?
To touch with your fingertips as you salute?

Think.
Think.
Think.

The whistle finally sounds.

Chapter 1: Radio and Telegrams

The 14th day of the second month of the year 3288 of the World Calendar.

<Good evening, Raputoa and neighbors. This is Republic Radio, bringing you the evening news.

The Confederation Department of Transport has officially announced today that citizens of the Roxcheanuk Confederation will now be permitted to travel to the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa.

Starting from the 2nd, even civilians will be able to use the transcontinental express bound for the capital of Sfrestus. The luxury passenger liner that crosses the North Sea Passage, scheduled to begin service this summer, will also be open to civilians. The curtains are finally rising on the age of transcontinental travel.

For a short period of time following the first journey of the transcontinental express train, the train's schedule will be built around tours conducted near the stations and the nearby hotels. This travel package will be conducted once or twice every month, and travelers are encouraged to join the maiden journey that is set to begin next month.

The price has yet to be determined, but according to the Minister of Transportation, it 'will not be cheap'.

In other news, public security in Bael is deteriorating uncontrollably as a protest calling for national independence turned into a riot in the capital of Baelcia. Police fired rubber bullets at the rioters, leaving many injured. There are also reports that farms are being robbed of produce in the countryside. If the situation continues to worsen, the Confederation Army may be dispatched—>

* * *

Evening. The first day of the third month of the year 3288 of the World Calendar.

In the town of Makkaniu, in the Republic of Raputoa.

"I don't believe it…" Wilhelm Schultz gasped in the plain concrete lobby of the Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School student dormitories.

He was standing in front of a wall of student mailboxes, which were packed together like honeycombs. He had light brown hair and brown eyes. On his arm hung his jacket, and in his hand was an open envelope. There was a stamp on it, marking that it had passed inspections. It was international mail from Sou Be-Il. Inside were two pieces of paper.

Wil looked down at them and mumbled.

“I’d better write back… I wonder if it’ll arrive in time?”

At about the same time.

In a certain valley in the Kingdom of Iks in the Roxcheanuk Confederation.

“Fi—I mean, Your Highness! It’s a letter! You have a letter from the hero!” A middle-aged woman exclaimed, rushing into the village hall. She was plump to put nicely, and fat to be blunt. The front door led her straight into a rectangular room with stone walls, which was furnished with a large table made with a thick board. Several village women wearing aprons sat around it, enjoying a relaxing cup of afternoon tea.

All eyes were on the plump woman. The only young person among them—a woman about twenty years of age—put down her mug and stood. The woman, who had short black hair, took the envelope with a word of thinks and carefully opened it under everyone’s gaze. And for dozens of seconds, she read one of the two pieces of paper.

“Oh my. This is a surprise.” She chuckled.

“What does it say, Your Highness?!” The fat woman asked nervously. Then, something occurred to her. She began stuttering.

“C-c-c-c-could it be a… a p-p-p-p-proposal?!”

“Unfortunately, no.” The young woman replied with a smile. “But that might not be so far off.”

“Oh my.”

“Oh my.”

“Oh my.”

“Oh my.”

Everyone reacted at once.

“My goodness!”

Cried the fat woman.

At about the same time.

In a pilot’s lounge in a certain Confederation Air Force airfield in a certain country in the Roxcheanuk Confederation.

“It’s here!” Allison exclaimed triumphantly, grasping an envelope in her left hand. Inside the small lounge were rickety chairs and several tables. It was dark, with the only light coming from a dim lightbulb. There was no one else around.

Allison had her long blond hair tied at her neck and tucked into her grey coveralls. Her leather jacket, aviator hat, and goggles were lying on a chair. There was a dark stain on the bridge of her nose—the only part of her face not covered by her goggles and muffler.

"Pretty good, Mr. Hero!"

In her right hand was a newly-read letter and a piece of paper of about the same size. The piece of paper was thick and expensive, and was a light cream color.

At the top of the letter were written Roxchean words in fancy, official letters:

[The holder of this ticket, Allison Whittington, is hereby recognized as an official passenger of the transcontinental express train.]

"Allison, are you here?" A female pilot in her twenties asked, stepping inside. Allison was practically dancing in glee.

"What's this? Another letter from your boyfriend?"

"Nope!" Allison replied giddily, ending her dance. Her friend frowned.

"Oh? Cheating on him already? Kids these days…"

"No!"

At about the same time.

A certain countryside village in the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa.

The gentle slopes were lit by the morning sun, dotted with citrus trees and identical white buildings with red roofs.

In the yard of one of those buildings, Carr Benedict lay on a hammock hanging from pipes as he stared up at the sky through his sunglasses. He wore a simple long-sleeved shirt and slightly messy cotton pants. Next to the hammock were a pair of comfortable-looking sandals.

"They must have arrived by now. I'm sure they're happy. I guess I've kept my promise."

Mumbling to the sky, Benedict held up a paper aeroplane between his fingers and raised his right hand.

"Whoosh."

The aeroplane slowly took to the sky and crossed the radiant sun.

"Benedict!"

A shrill female voice interrupted the flight.

"Benedict! Just because you're a historic hero doesn't mean you get to put off cleaning your room! You've been gone so long; why won't you be more considerate of your poor mother?

Clean up your mess, now! Also, we're out of vinegar and eggs, so go pick some up before you start! And *don't* get distracted hitting on girls!"

"Yes, Mother…"

The paper aeroplane spun, unable to take the barrage of attacks, and landed on his stomach.

At about the same time.

A room inside a certain building in the city of Sfrestus, capital of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa.

"Yes, sir?"

"Let me get to the point, Colonel. The plan you proposed has just been approved."

"Thank you, sir."

"I haven't done anything to deserve your gratitude. Now, do you really intend to personally take part—"

"I must finish this myself, Brigadier General."

"I understand. Then let me wish you luck. Fortune be with you, 'Major'."

* * *

The 22nd day of the fourth month of the year 3288 of the World Calendar.

"Marry me, Wilhelm Schultz! We're close, aren't we? I'm outgoing and you're calm, so we'll make a great couple, won't we? Just like my mom and dad! And we'll have a wonderful family together that everyone'll be jealous of. We'll have four kids! A daughter, a son, a daughter, and a daughter. We can start coming up with names tomorrow. Isn't that a great idea?"

Wil was lost for words.

He was sitting at a white table, wearing a winter school uniform. He was not wearing a tie. Wil was in a vast garden that belonged to a grand mansion—carpeted underneath him was neatly-trimmed grass, and around him were flower bed that had recently been planted with bulbs. From his vantage point he could see perfectly-cut hedges, sculptures, and a fountain. And standing proudly at an almost-annoying distance was a great white mansion. The spring sky was clear and bright. It was past afternoon, and the sun was disappearing over the Central Mountain Range in the west.

On the table was a teapot, saucers, and steaming hot-teacups—and beyond them, across from Wil, sat a girl. Her elbows were on the table, and she was leaning far forward with her eyes glittering in anticipation.

"Er… well, I…" Wil stuttered. The girl cut in excitedly.

"You will? You will! I mean, there's no reason for you to—"

"Idiot."

Wil's friend ran up from behind and smacked the girl on the head.

"Ouch!" The girl cried, turning around. She was about twelve years of age. She had long, curly brown hair, wore a long dress, and had a pair of knee-high boots on her feet.

"I didn't hit you that hard." Wil's friend said nonchalantly, pulling up a chair between Wil and the girl. He advised Wil to ignore her.

The girl took a seat again and retorted.

"That's not the problem here! What kind of barbarian hits a lady on the head?!"

Wil's friend took a laid-back sip of tea.

"If there's a lady in this house, then please enlighten me. And for your information, Wil is not a lady."

"I'll kick your butt!"

"Wil's watching, you know."

"I'll do it in secret later. That's right! You'd better watch your back!"

"Thanks for taking the time to warn me in advance."

Wil finally cut in on the argument.

"Er…"

Two sets of eyes turned to him.

"Let's stop this argument before it gets nasty. And Eumie?"

"Yes?"

Wil's friend's sister—Euphemia, Eumie for short—answered excitedly.

"Well… I've never really thought about marriage before, so I'm afraid I can't give you an answer."

"Really? That's too bad, then. We can talk more later." Eumie mumbled with a shrug, and slapped her brother on the back as he put down his cup of tea.

"See? Wil is a gentleman, unlike a certain brother whose name I won't mention."

"There you go. I'm not a gentleman to *you* because I'm your brother."

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Eumie demanded.

As Wil watched with a smile, he blew on his tea to cool it down and muttered slowly.

“It must be nice, having siblings.”

“It depends on the person.” “Depends on the person.”

The siblings replied in unison.

Wil and his friend sat facing each other at the table with a chessboard between them. Eumie was sitting in her chair, asleep with her mouth hanging open. Her brother’s cotton jacket, which he had been wearing, was covering her like a blanket.

As Wil’s friend scrutinized his losing forces with his arms crossed, a butler came running from the mansion. The butler, who was old enough to officially be a senior citizen, bowed deeply and handed a telegram to Wil’s friend. He took the telegram with a word of thanks, read the first line—‘To Mr. Wilhelm Schultz’—and said,

“Wil. It’s that wire you were waiting for.”

“Really? Thanks!”

Wil took the telegram and read over its contents. When he finished, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Not worried anymore?”

Wil nodded.

“Yeah. It’s all right now. Looks like I made it in time. Thank goodness… now I just have to set off. I’ll be able to take the night train, just like I planned. I’ll have some time to spare, just in case.”

“That’s good to hear. I’ll have the driver take you down to the station. And don’t sweat it—we had to take the car to town for maintenance anyway.”

“Thanks. I’ll get ready to go.”

Wil stood and headed for the mansion. His friend smacked Eumie awake.

Wil waved through the rear window of the car. His friend and Eumie waved back. The car headed for the gates, about a hundred meters ahead. It was nearly evening—the sky was growing darker.

When the car was the size of a pea in the distance, Eumie—still in her brother’s jacket, long enough to be a coat for her—slowly lowered her hand.

“First Mom, then Wil. Everyone’s going off on trips without telling us where. This is stupid.”

“Well, breaks like this aren’t too bad once in a while.” her brother said cooly.

"Okay, so Mom might've had to go meet people for business meetings. But Wil's going to be gone all spring break, and he hasn't even told you where he's going. For being your friend, he doesn't trust you a lot, huh?" Eumie commented, looking up at her brother. He looked down at her and answered without missing a beat.

"Sorry to completely negate that cutting remark you worked so hard on, but you're wrong."

"Really?"

"If he says he can't tell me right now, then he must have his reasons. A real friend would believe that and not ask questions."

"Huh…"

"And it's not like we'll never see each other again. I'm sure he'll tell me one day."

"Hmph."

"Anyway, I've got nothing to do now. I'll follow you fishing or something. You've got to put something on the dinner table, after all."

"Alas! Woe is my boring spring break!" Eumie sighed dramatically, turning to the mansion.

"Good luck with the pilot." Wil's friend whispered, giving a thumbs-up in the direction Wil disappeared to. The evening breeze wrapped up the siblings.

* * *

The next day. The morning of the 23rd.

Wil was sitting alone on a bench.

The station lobby was large enough to be a gymnasium. Metal arches supported the high ceiling, and about thirty five-seater benches were standing at regular intervals over the tiled floor.

On the left side of the lobby was a window. The lower part was made of regular glass, but the upper part was stained glass. Lined up on the opposite wall were ticket windows, which were still shuttered. Above it was a sign that read, 'Karen East Station - Republic of Niasham', a map of nearby routes, and a train schedule.

Night had finally come to an end, and white light was returning to the sky. But the clock on the wall indicated that there was still an hour or so until sunrise. Naturally, the only occupant of the half-lit lobby was Wil. Only the sound of chirping birds echoed from the distance.

Like the previous day, Wil was wearing his winter uniform(this time with a tie), and a long dark blue school-issue coat for winter weather. There was a wool hat on his head. Because the heaters set up in the four corners of the room were all turned off, each time Wil exhaled, he breathed out a puff of white. Lying next to him was his old favorite—or, rather, his only—leather suitcase.

“Am I too early?” He mumbled in the empty lobby.

The previous day.

After departing with his friend and Eumie’s goodbyes behind him, Wil left the suburbs and entered the city. He arrived at Raputoa City Central Station in Raputoa City, the capital of the country. He thanked the driver for taking him to the station and waiting with him for his telegram, then said goodbye to him as well. Wil bought his ticket and boarded the northbound night train that departed that evening.

The Republic of Niasham was a member of the Roxcheanuk Confederation of the East. It was located north of the Republic of Raputoa, and was also along the Lutoni River that divided the continent in two. The train headed north, the rails lined only by forests or fields. At night, there was nothing but darkness all around.

Wil spent a long time in his seat in the nearly-deserted second class car. For dinner, he bought a packaged sandwich through the window at one of the stations.

Afterwards, Wil took off his shoes and fell asleep with his feet on the seats opposite his. The train arrived at Karen East station. It was still closer to midnight than morning. Unusually for a Roxchean train, his trip had not run into any delays. He had asked a conductor to wake him at the stop—and when he opened his eyes, he stepped outside to a much colder climate than what he was used to in Raputoa. His fatigue was instantly chased from him.

As the disembarking passengers left on cars to their hotels or homes, Wil remained alone in the lobby. An employee who led passengers to the taxis in front of the station came up to Wil, but walked away confused at Wil’s response. After that came a concerned station employee. Wil thought for a moment before answering,

“I wanted to see the transcontinental express that’s coming in tomorrow morning.”

He was not necessarily lying.

“That’s perfectly fine. But take care not to catch a cold.” The employee said, leaving.

“Am I too early? …Though I suppose it’s better than being late.” Wil mumbled to himself. He looked around, and making sure that no one was there, took out an envelope from inside his uniform coat. Along with the letter inside, he pulled out another folded piece of paper.

The letter came into view first. The first sentence was scrawled expertly in Bezelese cursive:

[How’re you doing? I’m keeping my promise! Let’s all board together!]

With a smile on his face, Wil shuffled over to the next piece of paper.

The piece of paper was thick and expensive, and was a light cream color.

At the top of the letter were written Roxchean words in fancy, official letters:

[The holder of this ticket, Wilhelm Schultz, is hereby recognized as an official passenger of the transcontinental express train.]

Underneath in smaller font was recorded Wil's age, height, hair color, and eye color.

Underneath that was a schedule of the transcontinental express tour. This was the train's fourth trip since the tours began—in other words, Wil was on the fourth tour.

The schedule listed the meeting and departure times from the station in the Capital District, as well as stations along the way in Roxche. It was noted there that passengers were free to board at any of the listed stops. The last stop in Roxche was Karen East Station. The train would arrive at 9AM on the 23rd, and depart at 10AM.

The train would cross the new bridge erected over Lestki Island—which was, ten years ago, a battlefield—and the Lutoni River, which divided East from West. The schedule also had a brief listing of Sou Be-Il stations they were to stop at, short descriptions of tourist destinations, and the dates for the return trip.

At the very bottom was a certificate of authenticity and a confirmation number. Finally, there was a space for the signature of the purchaser. 'Carr Benedict' was written there.

Wil read the letter to the end, and flipped it over.

On the back were notices for the tour.

Listed first was the weight restrictions for the cargo they were allowed to bring. The limit was a weight too heavy for Wil to lift—in fact, it looked almost like the amount of cargo a family would take to move houses. The guidelines also specified that, though cargo that did not leave the train would not be searched, plants and animals could not be taken across the Lutoni River.

Other points of note followed.

That the cost of all meals(on par with five-star restaurants, also including vegetarian options), drinks, and liquor was covered by the cost of the tour, and passengers would not have to pay separately for them or pay tip. That during the tour, passengers could send telegrams at any time while in Roxche, and at all stops while in Sou Be-Il. That the conductor and the train crew had a great deal of experience in Roxche, so language and service would not be an issue. That one doctor accompanied them on the tour. That he should send a telegram with the confirmation number to the following address to receive a comprehensive guidebook which detailed the specifics of their itinerary in Sou Be-Il.

Wil carefully folded up the ticket and the letter, put it back in his coat, and buttoned up.

He looked around the station lobby. There was still no one there. Glancing at his watch, Wil closed his coat tightly around himself and closed his eyes.

Three seconds later.

Wil opened his eyes and mumbled, wide-awake.

"Sou Be-Il… Sfrestus… This is incredible. The best spring break of my life."

Giving up on trying to fall asleep, Wil took out a key from his pocket and opened his suitcase. Inside were shirts, underwear, sweaters, several books, and a large paper envelope.

The envelope took up a third of the suitcase. A thin length of string was wrapped around it—fitting, but not tight. On it was a piece of paper which said, 'Don't forget to pack this!'. Wil had written it himself, afraid that he might not remember it.

He looked at the envelope, relieved, took out a book, and shut the suitcase. He spent the rest of his time reading.

As dawn neared, the square by the station began to grow brighter. Another day at the station began. Wil closed his book and observed morning at the station from his bench.

First, a station employee did the rounds and opened the shutters at the ticket windows. Then, a janitor carrying a mop and a bucket expertly cleaned the large lobby. He greeted Wil. Wil greeted him back, and got out of the way for a moment.

Workmen began unloading freight from trucks that stopped at the square. The cargo was taken on rickety metal carts, through the lobby and onto the platforms. They were cargo, parcel, and mail to be transported via rail.

The first bus of the day stopped at the square. People in suits and fatigues spilled into the lobby. The first train of the day arrived with a loud noise, then departed with a whistle.

The store next to the lobby opened, selling magazines, newspapers, and breakfast foods like bottled milk, hot tea, bread, and bagels. Counting his change, Wil waited for a lull in the crowds and bought milk and a bagel. He nodded as he realized that food was more expensive there than Raputoa, where agriculture was a major industry.

The lobby was bustling. Though Wil was still sitting at the same bench, it felt as though he had been transported somewhere else. As he watched people busily head out to work, Wil took his time eating his bagel with sour cream.

He threw out his finished bottle of milk at the box by the store, contemplated buying today's newspaper, and returned to his seat upon realizing that he could probably get it for free on the train later.

Once the adults had gone to work, the students followed. Teenagers his own age, wearing unfamiliar uniforms, passed him by. Some glanced at Wil, whose uniform did not belong to any schools in the area. Some of the girls gossiped loudly.

"He must be a lost transfer student."

Wil soon remembered that spring break was on different dates in Raputoa and Niasham.

Wil waited on his bench. He waited and waited. The lobby was warm with the presence of people. He took off his hat and coat and placed them on his suitcase.

The morning rush hour finally came to an end, and the women who ran the stores were just beginning to have breakfast on wooden crates. A squad of police officers entered the station. Wil watched quietly.

About two dozen officers had disembarked from a truck. They were each armed with a rifle. The officers were led onto the platform by a station employee.

Wil checked the time, made sure that he hadn't left anything behind while he went to the bathroom, and said goodbye to the bench he had sat on overnight. He passed by the wide hallway by the ticket windows and opened the large glass door that had been closed to keep the station warm after rush hour. The sky was still cloudy; everything was grey. There was an occasional gust of cold air. Wil put on his coat and hat.

Karen East was neither a very large station nor a terminal. The platform was not encased in a dome like Raputoa City Central Station, and the lines were on either side of the station. There were four roofed platforms which were slightly higher than the ground. They were parallel to one another, stretching from north to south.

The lobby exit located at the southern end of the platform was connected directly to a crossing. Passengers were only allowed to cross when the signal was silent, and like most stations in Roxche, there was no crossing gate.

On platform 1 at the very front was a short passenger car bound for a nearby village. Smoke billowed quietly from the small steam locomotive at the head. There were no other trains, and there were no other passengers. The wide platform was empty.

However, platform 4, at the very back of the station, was full of people who were not passengers.

The policemen who had entered earlier were there. They stood in pairs at regular intervals, alert and ready. There were bottles of liquor and vegetable crates in the middle of the platform. About five or so men were next to them, speaking with a station employee who was holding some documents as they waited to load the cargo onto a train.

Giving up on stepping onto the heavily guarded platform, Wil took a seat on a bench by the exit. He kept his eyes on platform 4 as he once more began to wait. The train at platform 1 departed northward with a sound of the whistle.

The hands on the clock had just passed the scheduled arrival time, when a police officer blew on his whistle. Soon, a bell went off all throughout the station.

Wil stood and looked southward.

The rails converged into one, leading into a forest outside the city. Ahead, he could see smoke from a steam locomotive.

The signal began to sound.

Chapter 2: The Bridge Over the Old Battlefield

The station employees and the police officers, on standby on platform 4; Wil, standing in front of a bench; employees watching from the station building; and other passengers who happened to be passing by. The transcontinental express slowly approached as though intending to take away every person in the station.

At the head of the train was a steam locomotive with an unusual design.

In most steam locomotives, the large cylindrical boiler was on placed its side. Underneath it would be large wheels propelled by the movement of the coupling rods. Behind the boiler would be a small driver's compartment. And behind the locomotive, a box-shaped car called a tender, where coal was burned and water was boiled. In smaller trains, the tender was attached to the locomotive itself.

"I've never seen a train like this before…"

Slowly passing by his eyes was something completely different from the usual; an excruciatingly long steam locomotive. At the head was a box-shaped tender equipped with large headlights. Behind it was a chassis, where the boiler and driver's compartment were. And behind it was yet another tender. Four wheels were installed side-by-side under the tender—and as there were only small mechanical devices under the boiler, the ground on the opposite side was clearly visible. It was a high-output locomotive with two power supplies instead of one.

The black locomotive whistled sharply under the cloudy skies, passing by the point where the rails diverged into platform 4. The three-part locomotive twisted through the junction, followed by the passenger cars.

The passenger cars were painted dark green, like a deep forest. But from the tops of the windows to the roof, it was white. On either side of each of the cars was a single golden strip that ran horizontally, with a large golden ornament sparkling in the middle. The ornament was designed in the form of the potato-shaped continent. At the very center shone a certain emblem. A beacon composed of a vertical shaft with a curved rod atop it.

On the wooden sign underneath the ornament were the words, 'Roxche Capital - Sfrestus'.

Watching the cars make their way through the crossing, and listening to each bump of the wheels as they passed over the grooves of the rails, Wil remembered the layout and description of the train and the photographs he saw in the guidebook.

The first car, connected to the steam locomotive, was the freight car. It was used to store supplies needed for the tour. Although it resembled the passenger cars, it had smaller and fewer windows. On the opposite side from Wil—in other words, the right side of the train, which the hallway did not run through—were large doors for large pieces of cargo. The car also held a diesel-engine generator that provided the passenger cars with electricity, and there was a small chimney sticking out of the roof.

The second car was a sleeping car for the train crew. Excluding people like the conductor—who had private rooms—a crew of cooks, servers, and other staff members would sleep and rest in the car. The hallway was on the left side, and on the right side were bunk beds and a crew lounge.

The third car was the luggage car, which looked very similar to the freight car. Large quantities of passenger luggage and souvenirs that did not fit in the cabins were stored there. Wil, naturally, had nothing for that particular car.

The fourth car was the VIP car. Even in the already-luxurious train, it was a step up from the rest. Inside was a suite room, and the entire car was assigned to two VIPs. There was even a bodyguard lounge at the suite entrance, and the windows were made of bulletproof glass. The guidebook had explained that the car was reserved for high-profile politicians and the fabulously wealthy. For security reasons, the layout of the interior was not disclosed. But according to a magazine Wil had read, the suite was equipped with a bathtub that could be used at any time. It was even said that the sheer opulence of the interior was something for the history books.

"Well, it's not like I'll ever go inside… Although they wouldn't let me in in the first place." Wil mumbled to himself.

The fifth car was the galley. In other words, a kitchen. Exquisite meals were part of the joys of traveling—even more so during long trips on trains or ships. That was why an entire car was dedicated to a large and excellent kitchen where hand-picked chefs of the highest caliber could exercise their talents in full. The galley was even equipped with a large refrigerator and a storehouse for storing large quantities of food and high-quality wine.

The sixth car's function was clear at a single glance. Behind the large windows draped with light red curtains, Wil could see pristine white tablecloths. Atop them were lamps, silverware, and neatly-folded napkins. It was the dining car, fancy enough to pass for a high-class restaurant.

The seventh car was also a dining car. This one, however, had cream-colored curtains with delicate brown patterns. Unlike the other dining car, this one's interior was largely subdued —perhaps to keep the passengers from growing tired of the decor.

The eighth car was the lounge. Similarly to the dining car, it had large windows. Inside was a miniature bar, and on the wide floor covered with expensive carpet were comfy-looking chairs. And there was also a grand piano that had been brought in during the construction of the car, which meant that it could not be taken out without destroying the car.

"This one doesn't have much to do with me, either. I'll probably just end up passing it by." Wil, who was not old enough to drink in either Roxche or Sou Be-Il, mumbled.

Cars 9 through 12 were standard passenger cars of identical designs.

'Standard', of course, belied the fact that they were still the most luxurious cars in Roxche. The hallway was on the left side, and the cabins were on the right. There were only two cabins in each car. Each car housed four passengers. Ordinary sleeper cars, where cabins were lined with bunk beds, did not compare.

Stepping in from the hallway, one would find a squashy sofa on the coupling-side. In front of it would be a folding table and a window large enough to offer an excellent view. Further inside would be a bathroom, a sink, and a shower.

Toward the middle of the car, where the sounds from the door did not carry as much, would be two single beds arranged parallel to the tracks. In front of the beds would be a deep suitcase shelf that kept its contents inside no matter how much the train shook, and a small

dresser. Other than the fact that the rooms were long and narrow, they were little different from luxury hotel rooms.

Even counting the VIP car and the standard passenger cars, there would be less than twenty passengers on board the train. To keep the passengers' belongings safe, each car was equipped with secure locks. The doors and windows could not be opened from the outside, preventing anyone from trespassing. When the train arrived at a station, the crew would open the doors from the inside.

Four passenger cars passed by Wil as they slowly came grinding into the station. Through the window, where the curtains were tied back, he could see an aging man walking down the hallway.

On either side of the cars were passenger doors, and steps to help passengers down onto the platforms. The small rooms next to the doors were lounges for the cabin crew—one crew member per car. There were also bathrooms segregated by gender.

On either side of the cars, pairs of buffers with dish-shaped discs stuck out and met like supports. In the middle was a chain coupling, the brake hose, and a power cable. A wrinkly cover provided shleter over the coupling.

The thirteenth and final car was the observation car. The windows, even larger than those in previous cars, lined the walls. Metal piping covered the exterior like a basket to reinforce the wooden frame. It looked almost like a moving greenhouse or a glass box. Inside, two-seater sofas were placed in a row, facing the windows. There was a small bar that provided drinks. Passengers could sit comfortably in the sofas and enjoy the view from the car. The last three meters of the car composed a balcony of sorts that passengers could step out onto. Waist-high railings were installed to prevent anyone from falling, and there was a sunshade stretching out from the roof.

Finally, the three-hundred-meter giant of a train came to a stop. The locomotive at the front had already passed the platform. The ornate metal carvings on the railings of the observation car balcony were right next to the crossing. Platform 4 was concealed completely by the train.

"All right. Let's go."

Taking a deep breath, Wil took his suitcase and stood. Checking that the bell was no longer going off, he cautiously looked left and right before traversing the crossing.

His pace, though slow at first, gradually quickened. Realizing that, he slowed down again.

As he drew nearer and nearer, it felt more and more like the train was falling over him in an attempt to crush him.

"Hey! You there!" Someone called sharply, stopping Wil's approach.

Wil turned away from the train and toward the voice. A young police officer looked at him from platform 4. Noting that he had Wil's attention, the officer said,

"Yeah, you. This is a luxury transcontinental express train. You don't belong here."

"Er… I…"

Not knowing how to answer, Wil slowly approached the platform.

“Stop. No rubberneckers. Turn around this instant.”
Wil was silenced. For the moment, he stopped on platform 3. He thought of taking out his ticket, but he hesitated at the thought of suddenly reaching into his coat in front of a police officer. In the meantime, the officer crossed the rails and came up to Wil.

“I… well…”

“If you really want to take a look, stay by the station lobby. Platform 4 is off-limits to anyone but passengers and authorized personnel.”

“Let me show you my ticket—”

“Back to the lobby, kid.”

Wil moved his suitcase to his left hand and reached into his coat for his ticket. But the officer snorted and turned him away by the shoulders. He began pushing Wil away.

“Hey, you! Officer!”

A young woman cried harshly.

The officer took his hands off Wil’s shoulders and turned. Wil turned as well.

The owner of the voice was on the observation car’s balcony. With the dark sky at her back, she held on to the railing with her left hand and was pointing at the officer with her right.

She was wearing a light yellow dress. Her golden back-length hair fluttered in the wind.

“Yeah, you.”

Repeating the officer’s lines word-for-word, she clutched on to the railing with one hand and leapt off the balcony.

“Hyah!”

The edge of her dress fluttering, her two legs cleared the railing. The railing was two meters away from platform 3.

“Whoa!”

The officer flinched. Wil watched indifferently.

A second before her dress fluttered too high up, the girl’s military boots touched down on the paved walkway. Bending her body forward, she landed without a hitch. Finally, her golden hair silently came falling onto her back.

She shook her head to clear her hair out of her face. Then, she walked right up to the dazed officer. Her clear blue eyes highlighted her piercing glare.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She asked reproachfully.

“Er… Miss? I… this is part of my duties…”

“What do you think you’re doing to my companion? He’s coming on the train with me.”

“What? But—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

As the girl chastised the officer, Wil took out an envelope from his coat and unfolded his ticket.

“This *student*?”

“Actually, yes.”

He showed his ticket to the officer as he turned around.

“Thank you for your hard work. But you can leave us alone now. Get back to your job.”

Sending away the crestfallen guard, Wil and the girl stood face-to-face on the edge of platform 3.

“It’s been a long time, Wil. How are you?”

“It really has been a while. I’m doing fine.”

Wil nodded. Allison Whittington grinned.

“Hey, you didn’t ask if it was me this time.”

She twirled elegantly. Her dress and her golden hair danced in the air.

“You’re the only one who’d jump out of a train while wearing military boots, after all.” Wil replied, looking at her feet.

“I see. So I can’t pull off a perfect disguise after all.” Allison said. She held up the edges of her dress and slowly bowed her head. The hair by her neck slid down her shoulders.

Then, she looked up.

“Welcome to the luxury transcontinental, Wil.”

Wil took off his hat and placed it over his chest.

“Thanks, Allison.”

“It’s really posh inside. Don’t get a heart attack as soon as you step in.”

“I can’t promise that.”

Allison and Wil went up to platform 4 as they chatted. Wil could finally see the other side of the long train. Several passengers had disembarked and were taking in the outside air.

Workmen were loading cargo onto the galley and the freight car—foods, drinks, and countless bouquets to decorate the interior.

"Is that all you brought?" Allison asked, looking at Wil's suitcase.

"Yeah."

"Of course it is. All right—let's get to our car."

They walked side-by-side on the platform. The police officers threw Wil suspicious looks, but no one tried to question him.

"Where'd you get the dress?" Wil asked.

"One of the ladies in our unit is from a really rich family. Though she's practically disinherited because she volunteered for service and had an affair with a superior. She told me that a lot of rich people look down on people who don't dress nicely, and lent me some of her old clothes. She went to the trouble of asking a maid at her mansion to send them. Now I have all this extra luggage to drag around."

"Huh… by any chance, is she one of the people who kidnapped me back in Mushke?"

"Yeah. Surprising, huh?"

"Definitely."

Next to the observation car, an elderly man who had been vacantly gazing at the surroundings from the platform met Allison as she approached.

"Ah, good day, Miss."

The man was probably well over seventy. He had white hair and wore a clearly-expensive suit with a bow tie. His back was slightly arched and he was holding a cane.

Allison smiled as she greeted him back.

"Good day, Mr. Orres."

"And this must be the important companion you told me about."

"Yes. As you can see, he made it on time."

"Splendid. Why don't you introduce us later? It's going to be a long trip—it's a pleasure to meet you, young man."

Wil greeted the man back and passed him by. Allison explained.

"Mr. Orres is staying in the room next door with his wife."

"I see."

"Also, he's the chairman of Orres Studios."

"What?"

Wil glanced back as he walked. The old man was still taking in the scenery. Wil remembered the biggest film studio in Roxche and asked, "You mean *the* Orres Studios?". "The one and only." Allison simply replied.

"Anyway, that's the kind of company we have. Last night, this really rich-looking couple came up to me in the dining car and asked me who I was and what kind of family I was from."

"What did you tell them?"

"That I'm from the kind of family where my father could send me on the tour for valuable life experience."

"…In other words…"

"Everyone thinks I'm filthy rich. Leave it all up to their imagination."

Wil was lost for words. Allison looked at him from the side.

"Are you all right? Don't get a heart attack, now."

"I can't promise that."

As they chatted, they came by a sign that read, 'Karen East Station'. At that moment—

"Excuse me, you two!"

A female voice called to them from the back door of car 12. Allison and Wil turned. There stood a woman holding a camera. She was wearing a white blouse, a navy cardigan, and a navy skirt. Her camera was black and boxy, with two lenses—one above the other. The silver frames around them made them look like a snowman. The woman looked down into the camera.

"I'm from the local newspaper. Could I ask for a photograph?"

"What? We—"

Just as Wil spoke, there was the click of the shutter. Allison, who was smiling for the camera, turned to Wil.

"You moved a little just now, Wil. The photograph might end up blurry."

"You're right. Should I take another?" The woman asked, lowering the camera. She carefully stepped down from the door.

Wil looked into the woman's face. She was about twenty years of age, and wore simple silver-rimmed glasses. Her long black hair was tied in a braid. The camera's leather strap hung from her neck.

"Yes! Yes, please! Take ten, twenty, thirty more! Please!"

With Allison's voice filling his ears, Wil stared at the smiling woman for a dozen or so seconds.

"Ah!"

He exclaimed out loud.

"You finally noticed." Allison said, amused. The woman beamed.

"But don't say anything here. It's supposed to be a secret. It's been a long time, 'Mr. Magician'."

"It's this car. Hop in." Said Allison.

"Actually, it might be a better idea to get on that way." Said the woman with the camera, gently raising her hand at the opposite side. Allison agreed.

"Let me go drop off my camera. I'll meet you in your room."

When she disappeared, Wil spoke.

"That was a surprise. It took me a while to recognize her."

"Same. She's really good at this incognito business, huh?"

They began walking down the length of the car. The distance was about 25 meters.

In front of the doors at the end stood a man about forty years of age, wearing a light green uniform with a standing collar top. He was the crew member in charge of car 12—at the moment, he was speaking to a workman who was connecting the car to the water main in the platform. Soon, the workman pulled himself onto the roof by a handgrip on the side of the door and began doing some work.

Wil watched curiously as he walked. Allison pulled on his sleeve to keep him from bumping into the car.

"You there. Boy."

Out of nowhere came a woman's voice. Wil and Allison turned. Wil was the only one on the platform who fit the descriptor of 'boy'.

The woman who stopped Wil was standing next to the platform. She was in her mid-forties, wearing a grey suit with a skirt. Her long hair was tied neatly in a bun and secured with a net.

She was tall and stood confidently. Next to her was a mustached man of similar age. He wore a navy suit and was quite slender, looking rather soft-spoken in contrast to his companion.

"Yes, you. I'd like a copy of today's paper. Could you go get me one from that pile over there?"

Wil looked at her without a word. Allison was indignant.

"Hey! Wil's not your servant. And he's not a station apprentice, either. He's a *passenger*."

The woman seemed a little surprised, but her composure did not waver.

“I’m terribly sorry. I suppose I’ll have to ask my darling husband to get it for me. Young man?”

“Yes, madam?”

The woman seemed amused by Wil’s show of politeness.

“Make sure to guide your companion’s hand well. Let’s talk again sometime.”

Then, she winked.

“Of course, ma’am.” Wil replied with a smile as he watched the couple walk away for the dining car.

Allison was annoyed.

“Those two boarded at the Capital District. Apparently the woman’s the president of some huge company.”

“She looks strong.”

“She’s way too arrogant!”

Afterwards, they sought out their cabin crew and showed him Wil’s ticket.

He welcomed Wil without showing a hint of surprise. He took Wil’s suitcase and led the way to the cabin. Wil climbed the stairs into the car first and held out his hand to Allison.

“Here.”

“Oh! Thank you. There.”

Allison took his hand, leapt over every step, and landed straight in the car. Wil managed to get out of the way before she crashed into him.

The door was facing another door on the other side of the car. Next to it was the hallway. There was a door in between to keep the cabins quiet, but at the moment it was held open.

The three of them walked down the hallway. The interior of the car was mainly brown teak, and was incredibly fancy. Under their feet was soft carpet. Around them were polished brass handrails and curtain rods. The curtains were thick.

“Don’t get a heart attack from this.” Allison advised Wil from behind,

The cabin crew unlocked the cabin with a key and sent Wil and Allison inside first. It was cabin 1 of car 12. Wil stepped inside and was floored once more.

The interior was larger than the dorm room Wil usually lived in. It was also more than a match for the hallway in luxury. There were no cheap stones, rough supports, or flimsy wallpapers. Bouquets of flowers and ivory engraved with birds hung from the walls.

To his left was an imposing sofa, and to his left, two perfectly-made beds. Between them was a curtain that could divide the room in two. From the calming grey ceiling spun a silent ceiling fan. The entire room was colored in simple, understated hues that made it look quite dignified.

There were two electric oil heaters installed in the room. The windows were large. The one next to the beds was fixed shut, but the one beside the sofa opened from the bottom up.

As Wil stood in a daze, the cabin crew put down his suitcase and asked if Wil wanted to hear an explanation on the facilities in the room. Allison replied that she would do the explaining. The cabin crew then asked if they wanted something to drink. Allison replied that the tea from the day before was delicious, so she wanted the same tea and three cups.

"The conductor will be here shortly to check your ticket. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to press the call button. If you'll excuse me."

With a bow, the cabin crew left.

"Here. That way." Allison said, pushing Wil over to the sofa.

"You won't need these anymore."

She took off his hat and his coat, put them on hangers, and put the hangers into the closet.

"Oh… thanks." Wil finally managed to speak, falling into the sofa.

"…What is this?" He wondered, surprised at the softness. Allison chuckled.

"It's too early to be shocked, Wil."

"This is going to be one incredible trip." Wil mumbled.

"It's not like all this luxury's going to kill you." Allison said nonchalantly.

With a knock, the conductor entered.

The man introduced himself as Welch. He was about fifty years of age, with thinning hair and a small stature. He had an amicable smile. The black uniform Welch wore was exactly the same as those worn by other railroad employees in Roxche—with the exception of the gold buttons of his double-button top, upon which were engraved the beacon from the mural. To add, he was also wearing a short-billed cap embroidered with a mark—though most passengers would not know—signifying that he had worked for the company for over thirty years.

Welch did not seem surprised in the least by Wil. He smiled and treated him with respect as he went over the boarding procedures. Welch checked Wil's identification—his student card, issued by the Republic of Raputoa—and ticket, then placed the ticket into a binder.

Afterwards, he asked Wil about the luggage he brought and what station he would be disembarking at on the return trip. He also explained about regulations to keep in mind at stations, the kinds of whistles the train sounded, and that even if he were to miss the departure time, the tour would stop to make sure he came along. All Wil and Allison had to

do as they listened was lounge in the comfortable sofa—large enough to seat four—and nod. Somewhere in between, the cabin crew entered with a long teapot and a platter with three teacups, placed them on the table in front of the sofa, and left.

Upon completing boarding procedures, the conductor handed Wil a key. It was the key to the cabin, and Welch explained that one key was given to each passenger. He also explained that the cabin crew had the key to their car, and that Welch himself was the only person who had the keys to every cabin on the train.

“That will be all, sir. Do you have any questions?”

Wil replied that he did not have any. Welch reached up to the bill of his hat, when a soft knock sounded.

“It’s me. May I come in?”

It was the voice of the woman with the camera. Allison gave the conductor a look; Welch opened the door.

“Oh, Mr. Welch. Thank you.” The woman said as she entered. She sat on the sofa as Allison instructed.

Welch took off his hat, bowed courteously, and closed the door softly as he left.

“Let’s celebrate our reunion with some tea.” Said Allison. Fiona nodded.

“Yes. To success.”

“To success!”

Wil asked them what they were talking about. They answered in unison.

“For a good trip.”

Allison got off the sofa and sat on a chair by the desk, facing Wil. To his left sat the woman with the camera.

“It’s been a while, Fi.”

“It certainly has, Wil. It’s so good to see you again.”

The woman who had photographed them on the platform—Fiona, or Francesca—smiled and nodded.

“Please just call me Fi while we’re on the train.”

“Of course.” Wil replied.

“Here.”

Allison handed him a teacup. All three of them raised their cups slightly. Allison spoke.

“We might break the cups if we clink them, so let’s just do this. To a good trip!”

The workmen finished loading the cargo onto the train. The tender was stocked with water, and the freight car and galley with supplies and ingredients. The engineer, having inspected the locomotive, decided that they would not be using the backup locomotive that had been on standby at the station. The engineer of the backup locomotive departed, crestfallen. The station's maintenance crew climbed onto the roofs of the cars to check that everything was in order, and the cleaning staff quickly wiped all the windows. Once all the passengers on the platform had gone back inside, the cabin crew checked to ensure that everyone was present.

At precisely departure time, there was a long whistle. The wheels of the steam locomotive began to rotate as the steam escaped faster, and the train slowly began to move. After a slight delay, the force was applied to the couplings and every car was pulled behind.

The police officers saluted them, and the station workers waved. The massive train slowly departed from Karen East Station and headed north.

The rails continued in a straight line. Steam spouting from the head, the train moved along the rails leading through the forest.

The train shook as it ran, but not noticeably so when one was sitting. When standing, one only had to hold on to something on occasion. There was very little noise, as well.

"It's much more quiet than the regular train I took yesterday. This is incredible." Wil exclaimed. Allison admitted that everything sounded quiet compared to flying on an aeroplane.

Wil, Allison, and Fiona spent some time silently gazing out at the forest passing by. Then, they returned to the conversation from when the train was at the station.

They had been talking then about the man who planned the trip in the first place. It was almost funny how he had so suddenly sent the tickets, accounting for Wil's spring break.

Wil was now in his final year of secondary school. He told the others that things were going quite smoothly for now. Stories about the aeroplane that landed without warning at the school the previous summer had been exaggerated and spread amongst the incoming first-years, and some seemed to believe that the aeroplane had landed as part of a training exercise and that the female pilot was an ace test pilot from the Air Force.

"I'll make sure that happens one day. Otherwise I won't be able to fly on an aeroplane unless a war breaks out." Allison said.

Wil expressed his surprise that Allison had managed to get so much time off at once.

"It's because my legs are broken."

"What?"

"At least, they're supposed to be broken."

Allison explained. That her aircraft transportation unit had conspired together—for the duration of the trip, they would falsely claim that Staff Sergeant Allison Whittington had carelessly fallen off an aeroplane and was injured, and that she was in such an emotional

state that she was hospitalized in the countryside for an extended period of time. Wil listened, amazed.

When he asked Fiona how she had been doing, she answered optimistically.

That she was not yet officially Queen of Ikstova, leaving her in a rather awkward state for the time being. That she was living in the village in the valley as per a certain someone's instructions, enjoying the same peaceful life as usual. That she had a surprising amount of things to learn, which made things quite difficult for her.

"The hardest thing to do is acting like a superior. I'm really not used to giving orders and commands."

Fiona said that she learned many things from the villagers. Most surprising of all was the identity of the woman who first met Wil and Allison at the village entrance and sent them to the village hall. She was once a member of the royal guard, and before that, a detective with the Kunst police force. She was supposedly one of the cream of the crop, and a potential candidate for Police Chief. Having no family of her own, she had volunteered first to protect the newborn Princess Fiona as a villager of the valley.

Fiona also said that the valley received its first new residents in years—Captain Warren and his family. Though Warren was very eager, he was still being trained under the rigorous discipline of the other villagers.

She explained that she was still regularly exchanging letters with Benedict. Each time a letter arrived from him, a small commotion swept through the village. Fiona added that some of the villagers were against the trip, and that it took a bit of convincing before they finally agreed to let her go.

Allison and Fiona had both boarded at Niasham Capital Station the previous night—Allison, because she had been stationed at a nearby base, and Fiona, because there was a train that ran straight there from Elitesa. Apparently, Warren was in plainclothes and next to Fiona all the while, his eyes fiercely protective.

"To be honest, it was a bit tiring. I was really relieved to meet Allison."

Afterwards, they had been seen off by Warren, who looked just about ready to follow them by clinging to the car. The train had continued overnight on its way. Because most of Roxche consisted of flat plains, Fiona saw the horizon for the first time in her life.

Wil asked about her camera. Fiona replied that she had hesitantly mentioned the villagers that she wanted a camera—even if it was cheap—so she could take photos as keepsakes of the trip. That the villagers had held a small conference on the matter, and finally took a bar of gold they had stashed away to Elitesa to buy her one.

"I also have this."

Stating how much she treasured her camera, Fiona took out a leather pouch from under the belt of her skirt.

It was an object about fifteen centimeters long, and three centimeters wide and thick. At first glance, it looked much like a vertically-bisected glasses case. There was a hanging chain dangling from it. Fiona opened the case and took out a stick-shaped machine. It was shiny and metallic with a small dial, a button, and a lens.

"Is this also a camera?" Wil asked. Fiona nodded.

In her hand was the latest in miniature cameras. The camera had a reputation of being able to even take photos of documents from a tripod. The film was wound inside by opening a sliding door on the side of the camera.

Fiona said that she planned to take photographs of the interior with that camera, and took out a cardboard box from her pocket. Inside were extras of the lightbulb that was attached to the tip of the camera. The lightbulbs could only be used once, as the metal inside burned out in a blinding flash of light.

"Amazing. I've never seen such a small camera. I didn't even recognize it at first." Wil gasped, and asked Fiona to show him how she took photos sometime.

"Of course. One of the village men taught me how to take photos. He said that I was very good. Maybe I'll become a professional camerawoman one day." Said Ikstova's future queen, sounding quite driven.

Soon, the conversation moved on to what happened in the dining car the previous evening. Allison, with her borrowed dress and flowing golden locks, was the center of attention in the car. But the lady Francesca, who wore relatively humble clothing, caught no one's eye. Fiona added that she would not worry about being found out until someone actually did. Allison butted in.

"If someone finds out about you, I'll tell them that *I* pretended to be the rich lady to fool them all."

Allison and Fiona had considered going to bed straight after dinner, but because it felt lonely to be sleeping alone in such large cabins, Fiona had slept over in Allison's cabin. They added that they ended up talking for hours, falling asleep very late.

"Oh, I borrowed your bed." Allison said to Wil, pointing at a bed that was currently perfectly made.

Once the conversation tapered off, Wil moved over to the chair by the window and watched the world pass outside.

It was still cloudy. Because the sun was nowhere in sight, it was impossible to tell directions. All he could see were trees, the leaves only just now beginning to bud. On the ground were spotty clumps of dirtied snow.

"Apparently we're heading north for a while. Wanna grab a map?" Asked Allison.

"I heard we'll be making a sharp turn somewhere and heading west. So maps won't be of any use." Wil replied. Allison agreed. Fiona asked them what he meant.

"The rails that head westward were exclusively for military use, used for transporting personnel and supplies. Just like villages and roads, the rails in that area aren't accurately marked on maps. In both Raputoa and Niasham, and other countries by the border, maps aren't trustworthy."

"I see. Living in the countryside, none of that feels very real to me. I really do need to get out and see the world." Fiona said, sounding a little disappointed in herself.

"But that's going to change pretty soon, isn't it?" Allison chirped. Wil agreed.

"That's right. Soon, ordinary civilians are going to be able to enter those areas freely. Things that aren't necessary are bound to disappear in time. So that more important things can take their place."

"Urgh… don't remind me. I might get back and find out that the Air Force and my unit disappeared while I was out."

"Oh, right. Sorry."

"It's all right."

Watching Allison and Wil chat with smiles on their faces, Fiona whispered quietly to herself.

"The 'true heroes'… the two of you really are amazing. You've saved so many lives through your actions."

The train continued unimpeded.

Allison called the cabin crew again and ordered more tea. The crew instantly brought her order. He had also brought a small, cold bottle of strawberry jam, presumably straight from the galley refrigerator.

The crew then asked them what they would do about lunch. Because the highlight of the trip—the crossing over the Lutoni River—was around noon, lunch that day was scheduled a little earlier. He explained that passengers had the option of eating in their cabins or going to the dining cars.

"Wil can make his high society debut in the evening." Allison joked. They decided to eat in the cabin. The crew showed them the menu. Wil was daunted by the sheer variety. Allison ordered a lunch set that included pasta and lamb stewed in cream sauce. Wil asked for the same thing, but she scolded him.

"You should pick something different. I want to try other stuff, too."

In the end, Wil ordered the train's specialty sandwiches. Fiona ordered chicken stew wrapped in pie. They also ordered a salad to share. And as no one drank wine, they asked for more tea. When the crew asked what they would do about dessert, they said that they did not want any at the moment.

"I'll get fat if I keep eating like this." Fiona mumbled. She added that dinner was too filling as well.

"You can work it off later. Just run about ten times back and forth down the train." Allison advised.

"Then she might bother the other passengers." Wil warned her.

"Then how about the roof of the—"

“You’re the only one who could pull that off, Allison.”

For some time, they sat on the sofa as they watched the scenery zooming past. Once, another train passed by next to them. The transcontinental express must not have left the standard rails.

“Thank you for your patience.”

The cabin crew and a sever from the dining cars arrived with lunch.

They spread a tablecloth over the table, arranged the silverware, and laid out the food. And without even being asked, the cabin crew brought in a folding chair so that everyone could sit around the table.

“Please call us when you’ve finished. We’ll be here shortly to clean everything up. And please don’t hesitate to order seconds.”

Sitting in her seat, looking down on the already-sufficient amount of mouth-watering food, Fiona sighed softly. The specialty sandwiches Wil ordered were composed for two kinds of bread, stuffed between which were salami, smoked salmon, and a heaping helping of vegetables. They came with several varieties of sauce and were cut into small, easy-to-eat sizes.

They began to eat. Wil made a comment about his food—Allison picked up a piece from the edge of his plate and ate it.

“Mm. Everything here is fantastic.”

When Wil talked about how he had come by the night train the previous night, how he spent a long time on an uncomfortable bench in Karen East Station, and how he had a single bagel for breakfast, Allison could not hide her shock.

“I wanted to be there on time, above all else. Actually, I even thought of taking an express train yesterday afternoon and spending the entire night at the station.”

“Then again, if you weren’t at the station on time, I would have gotten straight off the train.” Allison commented, popping a cherry tomato into her mouth.

In the middle of their lunch, the train suddenly slowed down to a grind.

For some time, the train moved so slowly that it could stop at any moment. Then, it shook. Wil looked out the window, and told the others that the train was now on the military-use rails that headed westward. The rails that stretched north slowly grew distant.

The train slowly made its way along the curve and turned to the west. Forests spread out before them again. The train continued at a snail’s pace down the lonely rails surrounded by trees.

A soft chime sounded in the cabin. Allison pointed at a speaker on the wall.

<Good day, everyone. This is the cabin crew of car 12.>

Speakers were installed in every cabin so that the crew could make announcements. Though surprised, Wil nodded and stopped as he reached for the last piece of his sandwich. The announcement continued.

<If you would turn your attention to the right side of the train, we will soon be passing a post used by the Confederation Army. There are countless cannons, once placed to defend the banks of the Lutoni. Since the historic discovery last year, they have been slowly being moved back to a post further inland. We can finally see with our own eyes the transport of the weapons. Thank you for listening.>

After the announcement.

"Huh. I'm not interested." Allison said indifferently in cabin 1 of car 12.

"Hmph. They have no idea how easy they have it." Said a man in a different cabin, listening to the same announcement with a completely different reaction.

Another man replied in a rather mechanical tone.

"More gifts for the road to hell, it seems."

"Yes. Perfect for the fools riding on this train. I hope they'll give us an even better show." Said the first man, who added, "this halibut is exquisite."

After lunch, when the table was cleared and the extra chair taken away.

"I see them." Wil, sitting in the chair by the window, said to the others in the sofa.

The trees that they had passed by thus far—with more branches than leaves—disappeared. The rails passed by a small security post and multiple junctions. Each time, the number of rails parallel to theirs increased. Eventually, they came across a gigantic post several hundred meters wide.

Countless vehicles were parked there. Most of them were transport trucks. Squarish vehicles with sides and roofs. vehicles with no roofs and only bases, or roofless railroad wagons covered on the sides with hoods on the sides. There were also tankers carrying fuel and vehicles for transporting personnel. They were all painted in camouflaging blacks and greens.

There were also armored vehicles and vehicles carrying weapons. One roofless car had a small cannon loaded on the back. Others had tanks and armored vehicles secured on them. Some were built for soldiers to fire from. There was even a steam locomotive that was protected on the sides by armor plating.

Perhaps the soldiers were ordered to conceal themselves ahead of time; there was no one there. The white-roofed luxury express train slowly passed by the frozen post under the grey sky.

Wil stared out the window with his face to the glass. Allison and Fiona remained comfortably seated on the sofa.

"Hmm…"

Wil's expression shifted as though he had come to a realization.

"Something interesting?" Asked Allison. Wil nodded firmly.

"Yeah. Look over there."

At that moment, a massive vehicle on another set of rails came into view.

There was a long, thick mass of metal bridging two railroad wagons. Atop it was a long, thin barrel lying on its side, the tip of which jutted through the wagon and into the air. The railroad wagon was about forty meters long—sixty, counting the barrel. It was so large that the freight car next to it looked like a miniature in comparison.

"It's a railroad gun. I've never seen one in person." Said Wil.

A railroad gun was a large cannon mounted on a railroad wagon. It was pulled by a locomotive to a designated location, from where it pivoted around a rotating mount to aim at a distant target and fire. Following the first gun came two more, lined up side-by-side.

"So, Punisher Cannons." Commented Allison.

"Yeah. I never thought I'd get to see them with my own eyes." Wil nodded solemnly.

"I'm sorry, but could you explain?" Fiona asked. Wil, eyes averted, apologized and explained with his gaze outside the window.

Train-mounted cannons had been around for ages, but railroad guns had become much larger and gained increased range in the immediate aftermath of the Great War.

Although the facts were a military secret, rumors said that railroad guns had a range of over 100 kilometers. In other words, it was possible to attack anything within a 100-kilometer radius of the Lutoni River. And if necessary, it was possible to open fire on the frontline of the enemy forces from the safe distance of 100 kilometers.

During the Lestki Island Conflict, the battle was limited to the island itself and the river; consequently, railroad guns were almost never used. But because it was often said that the first weapons to fire in case of another large-scale war would be the railroad guns, both Roxche and Sou Be-Il invested time and effort into developing better railroad guns and more effective placements. The two parameters were among both governments' biggest military secrets. Even transportation of the weapons took place along military-only rails when the moon was at a sliver. It was said that civilians would never lay eyes upon them.

They were named 'Punisher Cannons' to mean that they would be used to bring justice to Sou Be-Il—in other words, to punish the West.

"…I don't know if that's sad or just idiotic. Maybe both." Said Fiona. During the explanation, eight railroad guns passed by the windows, and only the transport trucks and tanks remained. The thick bundles of railroads converged again at every junction. And once they were down to five railroads, four of them split off into pairs and disappeared into the woods.

The transcontinental express gained speed as it followed its own rails to the west.

Wil finally turned his gaze from the window to the others.

"It's incredible that we'll be the ones going to Sou Be-Il instead of the projectiles."

"It really is, Mr. Hero." Fiona said. Wil was a little taken aback, then, embarrassed, then serious again.

"We still have no idea what will come of our actions that day. So I'd like to live as long as I can to find out."

Another announcement came over the speakers. The train was soon to enter the buffer zone.

The buffer zone was an area agreed upon by both sides in the aftermath of the Lestki Island Conflict. It was a demilitarized zone that covered thirty kilometers from either shore of the Lutoni River. Inspection teams from the opposite side came regularly—or unannounced—several times a month to the area, and civilians were naturally forbidden from entering.

The steam locomotive expelled several long whistles. Soon, a large sign that read, 'Lutoni River - 30km' passed by car 12.

As Wil looked out the window without a word, the others remained quietly seated in the sofa. Fi spoke up once to ask Allison what she would do about her dress. Allison replied that she was too lazy to change and that she would keep it on until dinnertime.

Upon entering the buffer zone, and as they approached the Lutoni River, the woods began to thin out. Apparently, the Lutoni overflowed once every several decades, flooding the entire area. That was why there were few trees near the shore, leaving a flat plain. The vibrant carpet of green stretched past the northern horizon.

The rails were raised above the ground. About two meters over the plains, gravel was laid out. Over that were railroad ties and the rails themselves.

There were roads on either side of the rails. They had been used to build the rails, but now there was nothing but tire marks and overgrown weeds there. To the southern side were power lines that reached all the way to the island.

Occasionally, the locomotive expelled short whistles. A dispatch rider on standby in a security post by the rails reported the train's arrival.

"We're almost there. Once we cross the river, get to the island, then cross another bridge, we'll be in Sou Be-Il. It's been a while. And surprisingly, we're going legally this time." Allison grinned. Wil chuckled bitterly. Fiona, also laughing, remembered something.

"Allison, what about the flowers? Shouldn't you get ready soon?"

"Oh, right."

This time, Wil was the one asking for an explanation. Fiona informed him that there would be a flower-giving ceremony for the Roxchean war dead on the bridge in front of the island. Family members were invited the previous night, and Allison had agreed to join.

In fact, Allison had tried to refuse, saying that it was a hassle. But Fiona was insistent that she take part.

“All right, whatever.”

At that point, there was a knock.

The cabin crew, who made an impressive habit of swiftly answering every need, arrived with a beautiful bouquet and a pen to write with.

Even upstream, hundreds of kilometers from the mouth, the Lutoni River was a staggering fifteen kilometers in width. Excluding the area of the mouth, there was only one island in the middle. In Roxche, it was called Lestki Island. In Sou Be-Il, Green Island. It was a long, narrow island—seven kilometers by fifty kilometers—with a raised center and gentle slopes down to the shores.

Over the slow, muddy currents of the river, a set of rails stretched toward the island. It was a truss bridge, with a concrete deck and rows of countless triangles. It was rather narrow—just enough for one set of rails.

Construction on the railroad bridge was agreed upon in the direct aftermath of the historic discovery in order to further relations between the two sides. East and West took on their respective sides of the bridge. And only half a year after the hurried construction began, the bridge was completed. Its name: ‘Trans-Lutoni Bridge I’. The name had bested more poetic monikers like ‘Peace Bridge’, ‘East-West Handshake Bridge’, and ‘Lutoni Oath Bridge’.

The quick construction was not due to each side wanting to best the other in effort or speed. In actuality, it was because both sides had long wanted to build a bridge across the Lutoni for the purpose of invasion, and had been researching such a project in secret.

It was blindingly obvious that, if war were to break out once more, there would be a fierce battle for possession of the bridge. There were even rumors that both sides had installed massive quantities of explosives on it. It was also said that the bridge was built so low for fear of enemy ships passing through.

“I’m not even surprised at this point.” Allison said, once Wil finished his explanation.

Outside the window was the sound of fluttering flags, the diagonal bridge passing by, and the murky waters beyond.

“But still, I never imagined I’d cross the Lutoni by bridge one day.” Wil said, amazed. Allison did not seem impressed.

“Aeroplanes are faster.”

The train came to a slow before finally halting near the middle of the bridge.

As per the rule that the island belonged to neither side, the memorial service for the Roxche side took place on the bridge.

“I’ll be right back. It won’t take long.” Allison said nonchalantly, and headed for the dining cars with bouquet in hand.

Asking Fiona for permission, Wil folded the table and opened the window. A cold but refreshing breeze swept the cabin.

Wil put on his coat, leaned outside, and looked around. Several cars ahead, to the right of the dining cars, was a small platform. About a dozen people were squeezed there. Apparently, even members of the train crew could take part in the ceremony if they had lost family in the conflict.

"Do you see her?" Fiona asked, leaning out the window as well. She brushed so close that Wil pulled back slightly.

"Oh… yes. There're quite a lot of people. It might take a while."

Fiona spoke, sounding nothing but plain.

"I didn't pry too deep last night, but… I heard that Allison's father passed away here."

Wil looked out at the river next to Fiona and replied,

"Yes. Somewhere on that island."

For about a year starting in the spring of 3277, East and West were involved in a conflict over possession of the island. In Roxche, it was called the Lestki Island Conflict. In Sou Be-Il, the Green Island Conflict.

On the shores of the Lutoni the two sides fired cannons, on the water they clashed on small vessels called gunboats, and on the island soldiers made landing and dug maze-like trenches. It was also the first time that aeroplanes were deployed into the battlefield.

However, neither side took full control of the island—yet the conflict never erupted into an all-out war. The battles dragged on tediously with no end in sight, only the number of dead increasing day by day. In the end, it came down to a stalemate.

There was a chance that the conflict could worsen—both sides could end up in an all-out exchange of railroad gun fire, leading to a second Great War. But such a thing never happened, and the conflict ended on a hazy note.

"Oh, Allison made an exception for me yesterday and told me about Madame Corazòn the defector." Fiona said. Wil's eyes widened in shock.

"That's… certainly an exception."

"Maybe it was because I told her about myself. In any case, I'm very happy that we've become closer friends." Fiona smiled. The conversation came to a stop. Then,

"I… I once read the notice of death for Allison's father." Wil said quietly.

"What?"

"When Allison first came to the Future House, her father was still missing in action. It was about three months later that the conflict came to an end and a search for bodies was conducted. Allison received a letter from the military headquarters, saying that they had found her father's body—in other words, it was a notice of death."

"And…?"

"It was three years later, when we were in our final year of primary school. Allison and I were cleaning out our things—actually, I was cleaning out our things under her orders—when I discovered the notice. I didn't know if she wanted to keep it, so I asked. She said that she didn't mind if I threw it out or read it. …In the end, I regretted reading it. I wondered if Allison really had to hear such a thing at the age of eight. Grandma Mut may have explained it to her so she could understand, but whatever the case, the letter told her something very cruel."

Fiona gazed quietly at Wil's profiled face.

"May I ask what it said?"

"Yes. I'd like you to know about it." Wil replied. He continued.

"There's a very good chance that Allison's father was murdered by an ally. And, of all people, by someone Allison knew."

A woman and a young man, leaning their heads out the window. They looked out at the gentle current of the Lutoni River and continued to speak quietly.

"What… does that mean?"

"Let me summarize the contents of the letter. 'The body of Major Oscar Whittington of the Roxcheanuk Confederation Army was found on the shores of Lestki Island. His wrists were bound with wire and there were signs that he was shot in the head."

Fiona was silent.

"At the time, Major Whittington was working at the Main HQ in the Capital District. But he happened to go to the Roxchean base on Lestki Island to survey the situation, or maybe for another reason. That was near the end of the conflict, when the battles had died down somewhat. But unfortunately, the very day he arrived, Sou Be-Il launched an all-out offensive on the island."

"What happened then?"

"The base was plunged into chaos, and Major Whittington, along with the subordinate who accompanied him from the Capital District, went missing. Of course, that's almost a euphemism—the letter specifically said that the major was 'under suspicion of desertion'. Apparently they received testimony from the surviving soldiers that the major and his subordinate fled without trying to fight. That they ran in terror."

"But anyone would be scared in a situation like that." Fiona said firmly.

"I also agree, but the military doesn't accept excuses. Desertion is a serious crime, and the sentence is usually execution by firing squad. Otherwise, anyone who wanted to run would flee on the spot. In any case, his body was found near that area."

"But how did they know it was him?" Fiona asked. Wil paused. He slowly opened his mouth.

"It was thanks to his identification tag. The thin pieces of metal soldiers wear around their necks identify their names, blood types, and identification numbers. No one walks around with someone else's tags."

Fiona nodded several times in understanding.

"I get it. It's just like my pendant. So what happened to the major's subordinate?"

"He's still missing. Allison said that he used to visit her and her father often, and that she remembers him as well. That he used to always buy her presents, that he was from the northeast and had blue eyes just like her and her father, and that he always wore round glasses."

"But that doesn't necessarily mean that he was the one who killed the major, right? Maybe the major was killed normally—I mean, killed by an enemy soldier like the others—and the subordinate just disappeared. Or maybe he was also killed and his body still hasn't been found."

"That's not impossible, but the report pointed out an important piece of evidence. That the bullet holes in the major's head were left by shotgun slugs. At the time, only the East used shotguns on the battlefield—Sou Be-Il often complained that they were inhumane. That's why things are so suspicious."

Fiona did not respond.

"Let me tell you one more thing. It's about the work Major Whittington did back in the Capital District. When Allison just came to the Future House, she often said that her father was an important man who did secret work."

"Secret work?"

"I don't think she was being an attention-seeking child when she said those things. She was probably telling the truth. After all, Allison doesn't own a single photograph of her father."

"…What do you mean?"

"Ordinary photos a family might take at a studio once in a while. Allison didn't have any photographs of her mother, who passed away young, nor of her father. Not a single one. So I came to a conclusion. Maybe Allison's father worked in a special department in the military where he couldn't easily let his photo be taken."

"What kind of department?"

"This is just a hunch based on things I've picked up here and there, but… probably the intelligence department."

"You mean… he was a spy?"

"Not quite. The only duties of intelligence agents at the Capital District Headquarters are to analyze and research collected information. Allison's father was fluent in both Roxchean and Bezelese—he must have put his talents to use as an analyst or a translator. He never told his daughter any details about his work, but he never lied to her, either. After all, it's better to give her a vague truth than a lie that might be found out through interrogation."

"I see…"

"Back to the point. If the enemy were to take prisoner someone with access to such important intelligence, they would interrogate or torture him for information. And if he wanted to avoid that, but would also prefer not to face the firing squad for desertion…"

"…It might have been a better idea to willingly turn traitor… after shooting his ally to silence him."

"That's what the military HQ concluded. That rather than both of them being captured and killed by hostile forces, it was more likely that the subordinate, who was still single, betrayed the major. Allison also believes that her father was killed, not by enemies, but by the subordinate who often played with her in the past. Growing up at the Future House isn't the only reason Allison holds little hostility—no, almost no hostility—toward Sou Be-Il."

Fiona sighed loudly at the window. The puffs of her breath were carried away by the wind.

Wil turned, checking to see if anyone was still on the platform.

"But Allison's always been spirited. I've never seen her cry at the Future House—at least, not for the reason that she lost her parents."

Fiona paused. She fell into thought for a few seconds.

"Allison told me about you, Wil."

"Ah. Did she get really angry?" Wil asked cheerfully. Fiona smiled, saying that she did not.

"But you know, neither Allison nor I…"

"Yes?"

"Neither of us pitied ourselves for being orphans. We might look very unfortunate to other people—and we've been pitied, too—but I never thought that way."

"Me too. I was never unfortunate, and I'm still not."

"I wonder what it means to be 'unfortunate'?"

"Hmm… I don't know."

"Me neither."

"Sorry to make you wait, Miss." Said Mr. Orres as he made room for Allison. Most had already thrown their bouquets and returned to the train. Allison thanked him with a smile and stood on the jutting dais.

Oscar Whittington.

That was the name written on the little piece of paper in her bouquet.

A chilly breeze sent her dress and her long blond hair aflutter.

“Er… ahem. Dear Dad, in heaven—or the other place—here you are!”

With both hands she threw the bouquet. It flew straight against the wind and landed on the surface of the murky Lutoni. It slowly drifted down the river.

Allison turned as she mumbled to herself,

“All done. Back to the trip—this time I’ll do it for sure.”

Chapter 3: Major Stork's Battle

There was a 'station' on the island.

The island was overgrown with grass and trees not yet a decade old. It narrowed as it stretched further north, and the sharp northern tip was less than a kilometer wide. On either side of the tip was a long bridge, at the center of which was a facility made of concrete.

It was very similar to a station—it was a building where travel between East and West was regulated. The rails split into three tracks on the island, and on either side of two of them were platforms. The platforms were about eight hundred meters long.

On the western and eastern edges of the facility, on the south side of the platform, were two similar two-story buildings. They were residences of the soldiers and officials from either side. The third set of rails led to the side of the building and ended at a short platform were freight could be unloaded.

A concrete path led down from each building to the river. About twenty meters downhill was a large wharf. Small unarmed communication ships were moored at several of the piers.

The facility was surrounded by wooden fences, from the rear of the buildings to the corners of the platforms, making it impossible to go outside. The island was still off-limits because there were many undetonated explosives left.

A man stood on the wharf on the Sou Be-Il side.

He was wearing a brown Royal Army uniform. He had a kit belt around his waist and a holstered gun, and wore a hat and a trench coat. At his feet was a rather small leather suitcase.

He was in his mid-forties and was of average height and build. His face was rather long and narrow. He had short brown hair and round, scholar-like glasses that complemented the air around him. His eyes were blue.

The man stood at the edge of the wharf with his gloved hands firmly closed over the railings. He gazed silently at the vast horizon on the Lutoni River.

It could start to rain at any moment. He watched the water under the cloudy sky, looking just about ready to burst into tears.

"What's he doing, I wonder?"

A young soldier wondered in Bezelese from the platform, quite close to the wharf. He was the kind of man no one would ask for help from in a bar fight—gentle to put nicely, and frail to be blunt.

He was wearing a Sou Be-Il uniform as well, but his was a formal outfit with fine embroidery. His leather shoes were polished to a shine, and there was a leather belt around his waist. He was not carrying any firearms or blades. He also wore a dress hat on his head.

For some time his eyes had been locked on the back of the man in the trench coat, who was looking out at the river without so much as twitching.

“Should I call him over?” The young solder asked his companion. The companion was a fellow soldier in an identical uniform. He was in his late thirties and was a sergeant. His stout stature and short hair cast the impression of a seasoned soldier.

“Who?” The sergeant asked. The young soldier pointed at the wharf.

“The major, sir. The one who came from the capital as the VIP’s contact. Why doesn’t he go to the residence where it’s warm and have some tea? There’s still a long time left until the train comes in. I’ll call him. Ma- mmph!”

The sergeant quickly slammed his hand over the young soldier’s mouth.

“Quiet! Don’t bother him.”

“What? What do you mean, sir? What *is* the major doing, standing all the way over there?”

The young soldier was clueless. The sergeant replied, quietly but firmly.

“Are you an imbecile? Ten years ago, this place was the front line of the Green Island Conflict. He’s obviously thinking about the subordinates and comrades who lost their lives here.”

“Oh. Right… I’m sorry.”

“I’ll call him once it’s time.”

“Yes, sir…”

Waiting for the designated time on the platform, the young soldier sighed loudly. His breath scattered in the wind.

The sergeant next to him asked, a little gently this time, what was wrong.

“Well, sir… I guess I still have a lot to learn about tact.”

“Don’t let that bother you now. You’re here because you have a job to do. Not many soldiers are fluent in Roxchean, MOS Private First Class René.”

The soldier called René nodded in understanding. On the side of his hat was a white feather that the sergeant did not have. According to the tour guidebook, the white feather identified a soldier who could speak Roxchean.

“Sir.”

“What is it?”

“Have I ever told you about how I could speak Roxchean?”

“No. But if you’d like to tell me, I’m all ears. We’ve got plenty of time to kill.”

“All right, sir. You see, my father was from Roxche.”

“Oh?” The sergeant glanced at René’s profiled face. “A POW, then? From the Great War?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“There’s not many other ways to cross the Lutoni.”

René nodded.

“My father was even younger than I am now when he was conscripted thirty-six years ago. But he was almost immediately taken prisoner and spent the entire war in a POW camp.”

“So he learned Bezelese and stayed behind. I’d heard that quite a few people chose that option.”

“Yes. He was the youngest son of a poor farming family, so he didn’t have much waiting for him back in Roxche. So he said that he chose to live here instead.”

“Then what did he do?”

“At first, he taught Roxchean for the military. Afterwards, he started a small engine repair workshop with a superior he met while teaching. Then he married the superior’s younger sister, and they had me and my older sister and brother. You couldn’t call his life spectacular, but I think he was happy. Until he passed away four years ago, he never once said that he had any regrets about leaving Roxche.”

“That’s certainly a relief to hear.”

“Yes. But Father taught Roxchean to me and my siblings. He said that, whether there was another war in the future or not, it would be of help to us. When I first joined the military, I didn’t say anything about it because a superior advised me that it would be best to keep the skill a secret from the other soldiers.”

“I see. That’s why you were reassigned here from the Teruma Base.”

“Yes, sir. …Oh, wait. It’s the Teruto Base, sir.”

“Hm? The records I received said ‘Teruma’. I’m quite sure of it.”

“Someone must have gotten lazy typing it out, sir. It’s the Teruto Base.”

The sergeant was astonished at the typist’s carelessness.

“Then I’ll have it corrected later. It looks like that skill of yours was no help until you were lucky enough to be reassigned here. But that’s all right. Now is the time we need your help the most.”

René fell into thought for a moment, then replied, still doubtful.

“Maybe, sir.”

The man on the wharf gazing at the Lutoni slowly turned at the sound of footsteps. He greeted the sergeant, who came to a stop and saluted.

"Major. The train is scheduled to arrive soon."

"I see. So it's already time… thank you."

The man was polite, like a tutor hired to work for a wealthy family. The name 'Stork' was embroidered onto the name tag on his chest. He turned to face the river again. The sergeant stood next to him.

"The Lutoni River…"

"It's certainly massive."

After the short conversation, only the wind punctuated the silence. The still-chilly breeze caressed the river and the island as it passed.

Soon, Major Stork spoke up with his eyes still on the river.

"Sergeant. Have you ever come to this island?"

The sergeant immediately understood what the major meant.

"No, sir. Eleven years ago, I was in Sfrestus training new recruits."

"I see… this is my second time setting foot on this island. I lost many things here. For the first time I was nearly killed, and for the first time I killed another. I never again got to meet the excellent comrades who faced death alongside me."

"It must be difficult, sir. I understand."

Major Stork smiled, his eyes on the river.

"Yet this island is now the center of a bridge connecting East and West. How strange. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would return to this place, for a purpose like this. Or maybe I'm still dreaming?"

"Who knows?" The sergeant replied honestly. Major Stork gave him a gentle smile.

"A dream might not be too bad. Because, at the very least, it's certainly not a nightmare."

Then, he took up his suitcase and fixed his hat.

"Now, off to work. Whether it's a state of peace or emergency, we've all got to earn our pay."

The sergeant nodded and began to lead the way to the platform.

"Hm?"

On their way up the hill, Major Stork noticed something. He stopped and looked up. Soon, the dull roar of an engine began to sound overhead.

“That must be it.” The sergeant said, pointing at the sky. An aeroplane was flying over the bridge on the western side. The amphibious plane, which had an engine atop its wings, flew straight for the island with the bridge in its sights. Soon, it banked to the left with a flash of its underside as it ascended toward the Lutoni River.

“That must be from the Air Force.” Said Major Stork.

“Yes. He’s already received a permit for the flight. Some Air Force personnel is going to be joining the trip here. On vacation, at that.”

“My goodness… he must be a very influential man if he’s allowed to fly in the buffer zone for such personal reasons.” Major Stork said, astonished.

“The passenger list I received only said, ‘1 Adult, Male - Herman’.”

“A pseudonym.”

“It must be, sir. Some general must have pulled some strings to get himself a ticket. Maybe he’s going to have a talk with some Cross-River millionaires to talk about starting up a business together after he’s retired. Probably an old man with a chestplate of medals.”

As they watched, the craft made a landing on the river and began moving toward the wharf.

“It looks like I’ll have no choice but to pay him my respects.” Major Stork joked.

The other soldiers, including René, rushed over to the wharf.

The plane slowly approached the wharf. The soldiers quickly moored it to the pier.

A door on the side of the plane opened, and a man emerged. Major Stork and the sergeant watched curiously.

The man was still quite young, probably in his mid-twenties. He had rather long brown hair and a full beard. His expression was hidden behind his sunglasses. He was not wearing a uniform, but rather a pair of khaki pants and a brown cotton jacket, as though he were going hunting somewhere. His only luggage was a large duffel bag used by infantrymen. He looked rather like a wanderer who hitchhiked and stowed away on freight trains.

“Hm?”

The sergeant was taken aback by the betrayal of expectations.

“This is a surprise.”

The sergeant looked at the major, who mumbled in an amused tone. Stork continued.

“Well, well. He’s disguised himself. Although I can see why he did so.”

“Do you know him, Major?”

“Yes. In fact, so do you. That man is the Hero of the Mural.”

“What? You mean—”

"Yes. Major Carr Benedict of the Royal Air Force. There's no mistaking it."

The sergeant gaped in disbelief and carefully scrutinized the bearded man.

Carr Benedict. He was a fighter pilot from the Sou Be-Il Air Force who stumbled upon the Mural of the Beacon and transparently announced the discovery to East and West at the same time. His actions earned him the nickname of 'Hero', and he was given a special triple promotion to the rank of major. He was currently twenty-five years old and single.

He was speaking with one of the soldiers around him—MOS Private First Class René Falkrott.

"Incredible… so it was Major Carr. Now that you mention it, I do see a sort of resemblance… but if someone told me that it wasn't him, I might be convinced, too… I'm surprised you recognized him, Major."

"It's a special talent of mine." Major Stork replied, to the confusion of the sergeant.

"But I understand why he would put on a disguise and use a pseudonym. If he decided to board the train as himself, they might as well rename the train 'Hero Express'." The sergeant said, only half-joking. Major Stork sounded a little amused as well.

"To think I would be boarding the same train as the Hero of the Mural… It's truly an honor. Forget changing the name—they might as well build a special train for him alone. After all, it was his decision that ended the endless conflict. Think of the tens of thousands of soldiers who are no longer destined to lose their lives on this very river."

"I can't even imagine, Major. And I'm sure we'd be part of those thousands. I never imagined things would turn out this way."

"Neither have I. But it's not a bad thing at all. This, too, is a part of history. Although the conclusion ended up being quite unexpected, I certainly can't complain."

"I agree. All we can do is try our best in the time and place we're given."

"Yes. And I must do what I can."

As they watched, Benedict gave René a friendly slap on the shoulder.

Immediately upon stepping off the plane, Benedict spotted a familiar face among the soldiers who rushed over, and quickly spoke to him.

"Hey."

René was confused. Benedict half-dragged him to the middle of the wharf and lowered his sunglasses ever-so-slightly.

"It's me. Second Lieutenant Carr. Remember Teruto?"

"Ah!"

"Look at you! MOS Private First Class. I really owe you a lot from back then. And… "

As René stood with his mouth agape, Benedict gave him a hearty slap on the shoulder.

"Thanks for keeping your promise."

René finally mustered up a smile.

"I guess I made myself useful after all."

"Hm?"

"N-nothing, sir. Just talking to myself. Welcome to Green Island! This way, please."

Leading 'Mr. Herman' to the platform, René introduced him to the sergeant and Major Stork. René and the sergeant remained behind as 'Mr. Herman' and the major began walking down the length of the platform.

Not long after they began walking, Major Stork said suddenly,

"It's an honor to be traveling alongside you, Major Carr."

Benedict looked up, surprised. He gave a wry grin.

"I can't believe you saw me through so quickly. Excuse my manners. Major Carr Benedict of the Royal Air Force."

Benedict stopped and saluted. Major Stork quickly replied,

"There's no need for formalities, now. We're not here on duty."

As they strolled down the platform, they continued to talk.

"Some Roxchean friends I met during a joint training session are going to be on the train."

"Ah, that sounds wonderful."

"I'd wanted to invite the two of them to Sou Be-Il once it was possible to travel across the border. So I sent them tickets. I'm a little ashamed that I flew in here for my own convenience, but if I didn't meet them today, I'd have to wait until tomorrow evening to see them."

"You have that right, Major Carr. After all, you are the Hero of the Mural. I'm a little jealous, myself."

"I also thought that it would be great to be a hero. At least, until I became one."

"Does it become tiresome?"

"Very much. Being in the spotlight means you stick out like a sore thumb. So many things become impossible once your face is known to every man, woman, and child."

"I see… I don't believe I'm much suited to such attention. I take back what I just said."

"Where are you headed, Major Stork?" Benedict asked. But he quickly stopped himself. "Forget I asked, Major. If you're on duty—"

"Hm… I suppose I should tell you ahead of time. If you'll agree to keep quiet about it, of course." Major Stork said slowly, and continued. "There is a passenger on the VIP car who may go on to play an important role in cross-border trade in the future. Many corporations are waiting for him in Sfrestus, planning to worm themselves into his good graces. A certain corporation that sells cannons to the Army is one among them, and they requested that the Royal Army dispatch personnel to the train under the pretense of security and communication. Someone to get them ahead of the competition and butter up the VIP, so to speak."

Benedict said nothing. Major Stork looked at him, smiling.

"Astounding, isn't it? I also froze when I first received the orders. After all, I'm usually in charge of compiling war history records in the military's archives. My orders this time are to wag my tail like a dog and flatter the VIP as we cross the continent. I've been given a budget to purchase expensive liquor at the stations and even hire high-class call girls. Of course, it's all paid for by the people's tax money."

"…I can't say I envy your job, Major. But I hope things work out."

"Thank you."

"I'll make sure to keep my mouth shut."

"Please. It would be an embarrassment to the Royal Army if anyone knew."

At the center of the platform were people waiting for the transcontinental express train.

Security from both East and West, and suit-clad officials in charge of entry procedures. And repair technicians and engineers.

A little ways off to the west, a large diesel locomotive stood on the southern tracks. In Sou Be-Il territory, the Sou Be-Il railroad took over the management of the train. That was why everyone had arrived on the island early in the morning and remained on standby.

Though the Roxchean locomotive was large in its own right, this one was no slouch. The locomotive was over thirty meters long, and divided into two cars. In some cases, extra locomotives were attached to a train to provide more power—but this one in particular had a built-in connection, and could not be uncoupled.

It was painted a reddish-brown. The locomotive was shaped like a small box stacked atop a railroad wagon. On the box-like compartment was a large diesel engine and a generator. It was an electric-style generator that powered a motor by creating electricity from the engine. On either side were passageways lined by railings.

The engineers were wearing black Sou Be-Il railroad uniforms. They had all been selected from the Royal Army's railroad unit.

Finishing up the official procedures with the officials, Benedict and Stork stood side-by-side on the southern edge of the platform, with the wooden fence behind them. Many people shot Benedict suspicious looks because of his messy attire, but ultimately no one caught on

to his true identity. Of course, Major Stork made sure to consistently refer to him as ‘Mr. Herman’.

As Benedict looked down at his new watch and mentioned that it was nearly time, they saw a thick stream of smoke in the distance.

“I’d heard rumors that they were often delayed. I’m pleasantly surprised.” Said Major Stork. Benedict turned to his brethren from Sou Be-Il—the diesel locomotive and the engineers.

“Better not lose to ‘em.”

Major Stork chuckled.

The transcontinental express slowly entered the station platform on the southern rails. Soon, the second dining car came to a stop before Benedict and Major Stork. The car doors opened and the passengers disembarked for some rest.

Soon after stopping, the steam locomotive was uncoupled and moved to the second set of tracks. The diesel locomotive slowly approached and was connected to the passenger cars.

Conductor Welch stepped outside with a binder in hand, and began to speak with the officials from both sides. Benedict and Stork also joined in, introducing themselves and getting their tickets re-checked.

After the boarding procedures, Major Stork and Benedict were left alone.

“I believe I’ll be in the VIP cabin the whole journey. I doubt I’ll even have time to enjoy a drink with you, so let me say goodbye here. Have a good trip. And you have my word that no one will hear of your identity, Mr. Herman.”

“Thank you, Major.”

With that, Benedict pulled up his bag and began to head toward the other passengers. Major Stork also turned to the VIP car. But suddenly, over Benedict’s shoulder, he caught a glimpse of three passengers standing next to a car four cars ahead. A young woman with black hair, a boy in a school uniform, and a blond girl in a dress.

“!”

Major Stork quickly grabbed Benedict by the shoulder. Though surprised, Benedict answered the major’s solemn glare.

“Is something the matter, Major Stork?”

Stork sighed softly, as though trying to calm himself.

“Apologies, but I’d like to ask something. Those three young people on the platform…”

“Yes?”

“The… the black-haired woman there. She is royalty from Iks, am I correct?”

Benedict's eyes widened in surprise, but he quickly gave a wry smile. And making sure that no one was within earshot, he replied quietly.

"Well… yes. She is Francesca, the future Queen of Iks."

"I knew it…"

"I thought that was a convincing disguise, but you saw through it again. I'm honestly impressed."

"I'm quite fond of reading the papers, you see. I remember clearly reading of your actions in Iks last year. So she was the Roxchean friend you were talking about. What of security detail?" Major Stork asked, sounding quite serious.

"She's traveling incognito. Please don't say a word about her."

"…Not a single bodyguard?"

"Well… I'll be there. I'm sure it'll be all right as long as no one finds out, seeing as we're going to be on a train."

Major Stork sighed.

"Astounding… That's quite brave of her. So I suppose the boy and the girl next to her aren't servants. Are they just fellow passengers she met on the trip, do you suppose?"

"N-no. Those two are good friends of mine as well. Both Roxchean. I met them by coincidence during a joint training session. They are both fluent in Bezelese."

"Then they already know your identity."

"Yes. I asked them to keep it a secret as well."

"I see… I understand. I apologize for holding you up. Have an excellent trip."

Benedict walked away. The older passengers on the platform cringed at the sight of him. The three young people noticed him—their eyes turned to dinner plates, but they quickly broke out smiling and greeted him cheerfully.

Major Stork stood alone on the platform, watching all the while. Eventually, the four were led into car 10 by a cabin crew.

Major Stork quietly mumbled to himself.

"'The Goddess of Fortune is a cruel and fickle mistress', eh?"

"Er, Mr. Stork?"

Welch, the conductor, spoke to Stork from behind as the latter glared a hole through the platform. The conductor's Bezelese was not fluid, but exceedingly polite.

Surprised by his name being called, Major Stork exclaimed quietly.

“We’ve just received permission from the passenger, sir. Allow me to lead you to the VIP car. This way, please.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

They began to head for the VIP car on the western side of the platform. Major Stork, whose face had stiffened the moment he saw Fiona, practically lunged at a Sou Be-Il soldier who was standing on the platform.

“You there!” He called to the startled soldier. “Is there a telephone capable of long-distance calls here?”

“P-pardon? Oh, er, no, sir. It can only call the nearest base. Although we do have radio.”

“I see… Thank you.”

The conductor seemed worried when Stork caught up with him.

“Is there a problem, sir?”

Major Stork laughed and shook his head.

“No, not at all. I should be doing my work now.”

Opening the door to the VIP room, they entered.

The passengers on the platform stepped inside again, and the doors closed shut.

The locomotive’s whistle sounded loudly over the old battlefield.

* * *

“What is that beard?! And your hair! I didn’t recognize you for a second!” Fiona gasped in cabin 1 of car 10.

“As reunion greetings are done, why don’t we slowly enjoy the views? Look, the Lutoni River. She—er, it is beautiful.”

Looking up at Fiona, who stood by the window, Benedict spoke in Roxchean as he let himself sink into the sofa. His pronunciation had improved a little from the previous year. He had taken off his jacket, and was wearing a light green shirt underneath. His sunglasses were hanging from his breast pocket. The train slowly left the facility and began crossing the western bridge, which in appearance was no different from the eastern one.

“That’s not surprising. It looks pretty bad.”

“I didn’t recognize you, either. That was a shock.”

Allison and Wil, sitting on the sofa, took Fiona’s side.

After their reunion on the platform, the four of them practically fled into the cabin.

“Me and you have both disguised perfectly. Thanks to that, I think everyone will stay in peace.” Benedict said nonchalantly.

“I don’t believe this. I’ll go get my things from car 12. I left my change of clothes there.”

“Oh, let me help you.” Benedict said, standing.

“It’s all right. I can ask the cabin crew to carry my luggage.” Fiona quickly replied, leaving the room with Allison, who had the key to the cabin.

Benedict mumbled, “darn” in Bezelese. Wil spoke up in Bezelese as well.

“Excellent timing. There was something I wanted to talk to you about when Allison wasn’t around.”

“What is it? I brought my razor, if that’s what you were wondering. Though I’d prefer to let it grow out a bit longer.”

Wil shook his head.

“No, it’s about something more important.”

Still in the sofa, Benedict sat up. Wil, having finished speaking, was sitting in the chair by the window. Fiona and Allison had not yet returned.

Benedict looked thrilled.

“So she’s waiting for you at the capital? I’m glad you managed to get in touch with her.”

“Yes. It was a big relief.”

“Thanks for telling me. But you might not want to say anything to Allison until we get to Sfrestus. It’d be nice to surprise her.”

“That’s what I plan to do. Although I’m not very good at hiding things…”

“Don’t worry. It’s not like you’re doing something bad. Just enjoy the trip until then. This strategy meeting is finished.” Benedict said, clapping his hands.

“All right.” Wil nodded with a smile. At that moment, Fiona and Allison opened the door and entered.

Major Stork and the conductor were standing at the front door of the galley. Stork had taken off his coat and was wearing a plain uniform. Because the train shook, his left hand was constantly on the handrail.

Sturdy leather covers were wrapped over the couplings, and metal plates were underfoot. But it was still incredibly noisy when the train was moving.

Ahead of the coupling was the VIP car. Separate from the hallway that went through the passenger car, there was a door into the cabin crew’s room and the entrance to the VIP

cabin. That was the only entrance to the cabin, and the only way further inside was to pass the bodyguard lounge.

"These are the passengers on board today. There are no changes until we return to Green Island."

The conductor, who never had to hold on to the handrail, handed a piece of paper to Major Stork. It was a passenger list written in both Roxchean and Bezelese, and contained the names and occupations of the passengers.

"Thank you."

Major Stork took the list with his right hand and read through it.

Cabin 1 of car 9 was assigned to the president of the Roxche Capital District water company, Mr. Becker, and his wife. Cabin 2 was assigned to the president of a large clothing company, Mrs. Epstein, and her husband.

Cabin 1 of car 10 was assigned to a 'Mr. Herman' and Fiona. There were no occupations listed. Major Stork gave a wry grin. Cabin 2 was assigned to the Minister of Transportation of a certain country in Roxche, Mr. Green, and his wife.

Cabin 1 of car 11 was assigned to the president of a bank in Niasham City, Mr. Nathan, and his wife. Cabin 2 was assigned to the president of a textile company, Mr. Hinkley, and his wife.

Finally, cabin 1 of car 12 was assigned to Allison Whittington and Wilhelm Schultz. There were no occupations listed. Cabin 2 was assigned to the chairman of Orres Studios, Mr. Orres, and his wife.

Other than the four young people and the Epstein couple, who were in their forties, the passengers were all elderly—ranging in age from their fifties to their seventies.

Completing his check, Major Stork looked up at the conductor.

"I'll be spending most of my time in the VIP cabin. I doubt anything will happen, but… please inform me if something does."

"Understood, sir."

At that moment, the cacophonous rattling suddenly came to a stop.

They had passed the bridge.

The world outside gave way to a vibrant green earth.

"Honestly, we still have about thirty kilometers before we reach her… but let me say it early. Welcome to Sou Be-Il. I am honored to greet you three to this country. I hope you enjoy the trip." Said Benedict.

* * *

The train was passing through the hills.

Grass was beginning to grow, covering the rolling layers of slopes. There were barns scattered among the hills, and cows left to roam and graze.

The rails ran straight to the west, as though they were lines drawn with a ruler. On either side of the two tracks were secure barbed-wire fences to keep cows away. The transcontinental continued between the hills, emerging and disappearing between the verdant slopes like a single white line.

At the very end of the white line, on the balcony at the back of the glass-covered car, stood two people.

"Beautiful… We're pretty far north, but in Sou Be-Il, the area's used for pasture. I assumed it would be a forest, like in Niasham. I never would have guessed."

"Yeah…"

Wil sounded honestly enthusiastic. Allison did not. They were both wearing coats and gloves. Allison had her hair tucked in her coat to keep it from getting in the way.

"This is incredible. We're actually in Sou Be-Il. We're heading west."

Wil's eyes gleamed with anticipation as he held on to the railings. He lost himself in the scenery passing around him, with the rails at the center of his sights.

"Yeah…"

Allison leaned against a support on the side, watching Wil with a pout.

"It's really beautiful."

"Yeah."

"Isn't it incredible?"

"Yeah."

A little earlier. Immediately after entering Sou Be-Il.

"Well, I'm sure Benedict must be tired too. Let's go back to our cabin, Wil." Allison said suddenly in Benedict and Fiona's cabin. "C'mon."

She pulled Wil to his feet as the latter curiously examined the Sou Be-Il currency Benedict had taken out.

"We're off. We'll see you two at dinner."

The moment they stepped into the hallway, Allison shut the door behind them.

"Wil, let's give Benedict and Fiona some room. They haven't seen each other in so long."

“Ah… you’re right. It didn’t occur to me.”

“Well, now you know.”

They returned to their cabin in car 12. Allison took a seat on the sofa.

“Well, now that Benedict’s joined us safely, we’ll be able to rest a little easier. Why don’t you take a load off too, Wil?”

Wil, who had been staring out the window for some time, replied.

“I’m going to the observation car.”

“What?” Allison was shocked. Wil was already holding his coat, hat, and gloves.

“I want to enjoy the view from the balcony. We’re in Sou Be-Il, after all.”

Allison finally recovered from her daze and managed to speak.

“But… it’ll be windy and cold.”

“That’s why I’m taking my coat. I’ll bundle up. I even have my gloves.”

“Er… you can watch the scenery any time, Wil.”

“True. But I’d really like to see it now. I’m really excited for this.”

“Well, you can watch from here? We have a big window.”

“I’d like to see from the observation car. And unlike the cabin, the balcony’s completely open.”

“Er… well… right! What if you fell? It’s dangerous out there. Just think about how painful it’d be to fall off a moving train.”

“You’re right. I’ll be careful.”

Allison could not find the words to respond.

Wil made sure to be as considerate as possible as he warmly said,

“You can wait in the cabin if you’d like, Allison.”

The pastures gave way to a vast wetland.

The rails drew a gentle curve along the grass on the edge of the swamp.

“Look, it’s a marsh. There’s waterfowl, too. I’ve seen that bird in Raputoa.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I barely see any houses around here. I suppose that must be because this is a military-use line? After all, Sou Be-Il also positions its railroads away from population centers so the routes won’t be found.”

“Right.”

“Or maybe people in Sou Be-Il during their industrial revolution also opposed having railroads too close because of all the smoke. I think Grandma might have said something to that effect. But eventually, towns started popping up around stations, and everyone who opposed the railroads regretted it deeply.”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, here you are. I’ve been looking for you. Should we head to the dining cars now?”

In the end, Allison and Wil spent their time on the empty balcony of the empty observation car until the sun had set and the world had grown nearly pitch-black, at which point Fiona came to get them for dinner.

Wil, Allison, Benedict, and Fiona passed through the hallways, crossed the couplings, and headed for the dining cars.

Three tables that seated four were in the car. The tables were lined up along the length of the car, and each table was as large as those in restaurants. In car 7, eight people had put two tables together and were enjoying dinner together. Wil and the others passed right by them.

The four of them were still dressed as they were at lunchtime. On some luxury trains in Roxche, passengers were required to dress in formalwear to enjoy dinner. But as the tour to Sfrestus took multiple days, passengers were free to dress as they wished, with the exception of several occasions. But setting aside Wil, who wore his school uniform with a tie, Benedict in his comfortable shirt clashed so much with the train that some people on car 7 gave him dirty looks. But no one realized that Benedict was the man who had made the front page in the newspapers.

“They couldn’t possibly imagine that I’d be here, dressed like this.”

In car 6, four passengers were seated at a table. The middle-aged woman who ordered Wil to get her a newspaper at the platform earlier and her husband. Across from them was a couple in their sixties. They were all in formalwear, and having finished dinner, were eating dessert.

Wil and the others took the table nearest to the front, with the men facing one another and the women facing one another. The men sat at the aisle seats and the women sat at the window seats. The server who pulled out the chairs for them soon brought them menus.

Wil’s brow furrowed at the increased variety of meals offered at dinnertime.

“We have much time. Please decide slowly.” Benedict said to Fiona.

“Yes…” She replied. She scrutinized the menu from behind her non-prescription glasses. In the end, Wil and Fiona were lost until the end as to what they should have for dinner.

The four of them each chose a different meal. Allison ordered anchovy pasta. Wil ordered lasagna with meat sauce. Benedict ordered venison steak with vegetables. Fiona ordered cheese risotto. For hors d'oeuvres they ordered two prawn cocktails, two plates of raw oysters—recommended by the server as fresh from Karen East Station—and two plates of vegetable salad. As for beverages, everyone ordered tea—with the exception of Wil, who ordered lemon squash because he was not very good with hot drinks.

As they waited for their food, the four people on the opposite side of the car finished and stood. The suit-clad man in his sixties approached the table at the front.

With his face flushed bright red from alcohol, the man greeted the four and walked right up to the table.

"If you'll excuse us elders. I'm sure it must be a great experience for young people to experience such luxury."

His words were polite, but his tone was not. Benedict replied curtly.

"Yes. Of course."

As the old man got angry, a woman spoke up from behind. It was the female president who had ordered Wil around earlier.

"Mr. Becker. Let's not pester the young people. Why don't we 'elders' go for some drinks?"

The drunk seemed to want to say something, but he turned around. He left the dining car alongside the middle-aged couple and his worried wife.

"Damned old man." Allison grumbled in a decidedly non-ladylike tone.

"I think people like him are everywhere." Benedict said. "Do not worry about them. To be honest, you three people need a special exclusive car for yourselves."

With the dining car to themselves, the four of them took a very long time in finishing their mountain of food. Fiona, who ended up eating fruit and ice cream for dessert, asked Allison to tell her if she figured out a way to safely jog through the halls of the train.

Leaving the dining car, they followed Wil's advice and passed through the lounge car, where elders with time on their hands were drinking and dancing.

In front of cabin 1 of of car 10, Benedict said meaningfully,

"Rest comfortably, now. Fortune be with you."

Allison and Wil went to their cabin in car 12. Left there was a piece of paper that they were to hang outside the door with their orders for breakfast, some chocolate(presumably a midnight snack), and a bottle of water. The heating was on at a slightly high temperature.

The train shook quietly as it ran through the darkness. There were no lights from villages anywhere.

Closing the curtains on the window by the beds, she grabbed the curtains that divided the room.

“I’m going to change. No peeking, okay?”

With that, she shut the curtains. There was a faint sound of shuffling sleeves from across. Naturally, Wil did exactly as he was told. He turned on a small lamp and wrote in his journal.

Allison pouted a little as she opened the curtains. Instead of pajamas, she was wearing Air Force-issue khaki work pants, and a white round-necked sweatshirt she wore for training. Tiny letters—the initials of the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force—were embroidered on the left sleeve.

“How long are you going to stay in your uniform, Wil?”

At Allison’s urging, Wil took off his uniform and changed into the checkered winter pajamas he wore at the dorms. He put his uniform shoes into the shoe cabinet and put on the slippers prepared for him in the cabin.

Wil opened the curtain and returned to the sofa. He sank down next to Allison.

“Today was a long day… a long, fun day.” He mumbled.

Outside the window was pitch black. There was only Allison and Wil, reflected in the glass by lamplight.

“Say, Wil.”

“Yeah?”

“Aren’t you going to showrrrrk.”

Allison bit her tongue.

“Ouch…”

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Whew. Anyway, aren’t you going to shower?”

“Right.” Wil said, getting to his feet. He looked into the shower room that was further inside the bathroom and asked Allison how to use it. She told him that the shower head could be removed, and that he had to adjust the temperature beforehand. Because the train had to preserve water, pressing the water button would give him a short supply at a time.

“That is all! Take your time.”

Wil took a towel from the cabin, which was embroidered with a crest, thanked Allison, and stepped inside the shower.

Allison sat on the sofa. Sometimes she stood suddenly and sat back down again. Sometimes she poked at her reflection in the window as she sat and stood. And she checked to make sure that the cabin was locked.

“That was refreshing. I hadn’t showered in over a day.”

When Wil came outside in his pajamas, shaking water out of his hair, Allison was shooting a frightening glare at her own reflection.

“Oh, er… r-really? Well… I, er… I showered this morning, but would you mind if I showered again?”

“Go ahead.” Wil replied. Allison rushed between the sofa and her suitcase several times before going into the shower.

Soon.

Allison left the shower, her long hair done up.

And Wil,

“Huh?”

Wil was in his bed, covered snug in the blanket made specially for the train, with his eyes comfortably closed.

“It can’t be!”

Allison flung her towel aside and hurried to the bed, kneeling beside Wil.

“Wil!”

Wil replied with his eyes still shut.

“I didn’t get much sleep last night… I’m tired…”

For some time, Allison’s lips trembled silently.

“Say, Wil? Er… I…”

“I’m going to sleep first…”

“Wait! By yourself? N-no, that’s not what I meant!”

She grabbed him by the left shoulder.

“Hm?”

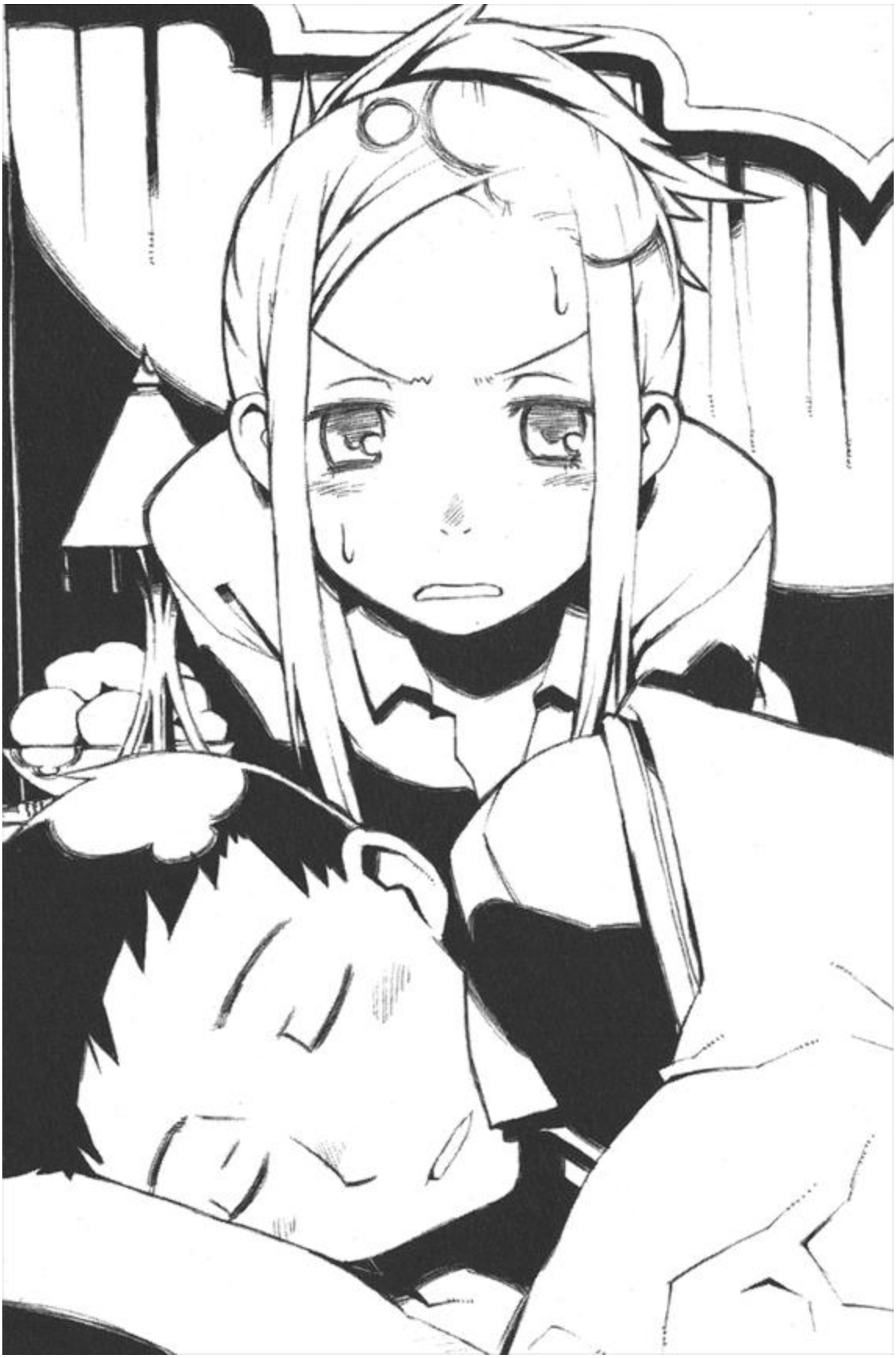
Wil’s sleepy eyes opened halfway. Allison spoke.

“I-I have something important and complicated and important to tell you…”

This time, she said ‘important’ twice. Wil’s answer was immediate.

“Then tell me tomorrow… I can’t listen to something important when I’m tired.”

With a soft sigh, Wil fell right asleep.



Allison was frozen for some time. She finally staggered toward the sofa. She turned out the lamp beside the beds and closed the curtain dividing the beds from the living area.

“Man…”

With a sigh she sat on the sofa and pulled out a hairpin. Her long hair cascaded down over her face. Allison glared at the room through her obscured vision.

“Wonder if I can break something in here?”

A little before midnight.

Major Stork quietly opened the door and stepped into the observation car, where nearly every light had been extinguished. He was in his uniform, but without a jacket and with his necktie stuffed into his breast pocket. In his hand was a flashlight that was turned off.

He glanced at the small bar to the left of the entrance. The bartender had already turned in for the night.

“!”

As he inspected the observation car, Major Stork was taken by surprise. A girl with long blond hair was sitting on a sofa in the middle of the darkened car.

“That gave me a fright…” He whispered in Bezelese. Allison looked up, displeased.

“Who’re you? You’re not Roxchean.” She asked in Bezelese. Major Stork first asked if he could turn on the lights, waited for permission, then hit the switch next to the bar. The lightbulbs by the ceiling began to glow a faint orange. The car was filled with a gentle glow.

“I’m in charge of security for the VIP car. Stork from the Sou Be-Il armed forces. I’m a major from the Royal Army. I was just inspecting this car—I apologize if I bothered you.”

Allison turned away at Stork’s excuse and replied,

“I see. It’s okay, take a seat.”

Major Stork first walked over to the balcony and pointed his flashlight outside. He returned after checking that there was no one there. Allison’s face, glaring out the window, was reflected on the glass.

“All clear.” Major Stork said mechanically, and leaned against the bar. He turned to Allison, his tone softer than before.

“I saw that you had a companion with you. Why all alone here in this car?”

Allison gazed at her reflection in the window and answered curtly.

“Because it’s time for good boys to go to bed.”

Major Stork chuckled.

"Are the two of you siblings? You certainly don't look it."

"What are you talking about? Are you joking with me?"

"Well, I thought it might be rude to ask directly."

"He's my childhood friend. The only family an orphan like me has. And the person I wish would become my family. Does that tell you enough?"

"I see… I understand. But seeing as you're alone, I suppose you haven't told him yet."

"*Yet*. What, are you trying to hit on me, mister?"

Allison looked a little upset. Major Stork replied lightheartedly,

"It's good to be young."

"Hmph. You sound like an old man." Allison said, looking straight ahead.

"As you can see, I've gone through many things in life. But you're still young. There's nothing to be so anxious of. You'll have many more chances in the future."

Allison laughed. Her grin was cast against the glass window.

"That would be nice. But I'd prefer that he doesn't find out how I feel from my will."

"Your will?" Major Stork repeated, his brow furrowing. Allison nodded.

"Yes. My will."

Surprised, Major Stork's eyes slowly widened. For several seconds he was silent, and all the while Allison kept her eyes on the window.

"Does this mean… that you have a job that requires you to write a will…?"

"Guess you can't fool a fellow professional. You're quick to catch on. I'm a pilot in the Confederation Air Force. Though I'm still just a staff sergeant." Allison said mockingly, looking up at Major Stork's bewildered face. She raised her right hand and lightly saluted him.

"A pilot… in the Confederation Air Force…"

"What, never seen a child soldier before? They have those in Sou Be-Il, don't they?"

"Oh, yes…" Major Stork replied, "I also know…"

"Hm? What?" Allison asked, her gaze on his face.

"…How cruel a will can be. I've written one myself before, just before I went into the battlefield. It was… terrible. I was disgusted. What use is there in my feelings reaching others only after my own death?"

"Looks like we have something in common, mister."

“Thank you. Ah, my name is Stork Fren. I’ll be on board until we arrive at Sfrestus. It’s a pleasure to meet you. And you are…?”

“Allison Whittington. Staff sergeant.”

With a half-hearted bow, Allison stood with her hair fluttering behind her. And she walked past Major Stork.

“Well, let’s pray for each other’s success or whatever.”

“Yes. I pray for success. For both your wish and my mission.”

With a light wave, Allison passed him by and left the observation car.

When Allison left his sight, Major Stork extinguished the lights in the car and headed for the balcony. He opened the door and stepped outside, and a cold breeze shook his short hair.

When he looked up, the stars were lighting the gaps between the clouds.

Major Stork tightly gripped the railings.

“Whittington’s daughter… of all people…”

His murmur flowed from the back of the car along with the puffs of his breath.

Cabin 1 of car 12. A boy was in one of the two beds. He lay face-up with his mouth slightly agape, his breathing consistent as he slept.

The bed next to his was empty. And between his bed and the other crouched a girl with blond hair. Her chin rested on his bed as she glared at his carefree profile.

The sound of three wheels passing over the grooves of the rails was accompanied by shaking, in a perfect triple-time rhythm. Soon, the girl slowly closed her eyes.

Chapter 4: Reasons for the Murders

The first thing Wil heard as he awoke was the sound of the wheels passing over the grooves of the rails. Soon, he saw the white ceiling tinted blue by the faint light seeping from the window.

He slowly sat up. His blanket slid off of him. The cabin was well-heated and warm. The curtain dividing the room was pulled open. The curtain on the window was also open. The dim light hit the sofa through the foggy glass.

"Hm. That was a good night's sleep."

Opening his eyes, as well-rested as any other morning, Wil mumbled to himself and turned to the bed next to his. There was no one there.

The bed was messy, and the blanket was missing. When Wil glanced at the bathroom door, he saw that the door was in unlocked position.

"Huh…?"

Confused, Wil put his feet down over the left side of the bed.

"Urk!"

And he stepped on Allison, who was rolled up in her blanket on the floor.

"Again, I'm really sorry, Allison."

"Never mind. Thanks to you, I feel wide awake."

Wil apologized to Allison again after she changed and stepped out from behind the curtains.

Wil was wearing his uniform pants and a white shirt that was not part of his uniform. Over that he wore a light cotton jacket he usually wore outside. Allison was wearing, not a dress, but pants. Her pants were the same ones she wore to sleep, and her top was an Air Force-issue dark red turtleneck over a T-shirt.

"Anyway, what should we do, Wil? It's not even dawn yet."

"Dunno…"

There was still some time before the sun rose over the mountains. And there was even more time before the breakfast they ordered would arrive. Wil glanced outside the window. Allison spoke up.

"Going to the observation car? I'll go with you."

The train was racing through the mountains.

They had left the plains, and were surrounded by slopes. Trees just beginning to bud with leaves covered the mountains, and patches of rocky surface were visible around the peaks.

There was a valley about 50 meters wide, with a shallow, 30-meter-wide river running underneath. Unlike the Lutoni, the river was so clear that the rocks inside were visible. Along the southern shore of the river was a single set of rails that followed the river's edge. The tracks twisted and bent along the winding valley, climbing a gentle slope.

The train squirmed uphill at half its speed from the plains. The sky was violet, only just greeting the sun. It was clear save for a thin layer of cirrus clouds. The white half-moon was still visible in the western sky.

The train was about three hundred kilometers from the Lutoni River, in the area known as the Iltoa Mountain Range. Although it did not compare to the massive Central Mountain Range, which bisected the southern half of the continent, mountains as high as 2000 meters extended from north to south for about 700 kilometers. Unlike Roxche, which was mostly flat, there were several such mountain ranges in the West.

The train was running down the tracks passing through the mountain range. The passage had been completed forty years ago—it was painstaking work that, in the end, allowed people to cross straight through the mountains instead of going around them. The tracks continued down the river, before passing through several tunnels and stretching past a mountain pass.

"The view's going to be great all day today. I can tell. I've never seen mountains during the spring before. And I've never gone through tunnels while I was riding on a train. And when we cross the mountain range in the evening, we'll be able to see the sun set on the plains, too." Wil said, excited.

"All right. Then I'll stick with you all day long." Allison replied, opening the door to their cabin and stepping outside. They were both carrying their coats because it was still cold.

Wil came out to the deserted hallway as well, and whispered so he wouldn't bother the other passengers.

"Let's go to the cabin crew and ask him to call us in time for breakfast. So he doesn't end up thinking we're sleeping in."

First, they walked in the opposite direction from the observation car and opened the door in the hallway. When they arrived at the door to the cabin crew's lounge, in front of the bathroom and the doors into the car, Wil stopped.

"Maybe he's still asleep… maybe we shouldn't wake him?"

"Maybe. But this is part of his job."

Allison knocked on the cabin door without a second thought.

There was no answer. Allison waited for a moment, then knocked again. There was still no answer. Allison pointed at the door with the glazed window and turned to Wil.

"You think he's still asleep?"

She knocked again, but there was no sign of a reply.

“After all this knocking, I’d be surprised if he was inside. Maybe he’s getting breakfast ready at the galley, or maybe he’s at a crew meeting?” Wil suggested.

“At this hour? Talk about dedicated.”

“It must be rough.”

“Never mind. We’ll leave him a note and go.”

“All right.”

There was a small blackboard beside the door, used to communicate when the crew was absent. Allison wrote, ‘Cabin 1 passengers both in observation car’.

Allison and Wil left the door. From the perspective of the cabin, their fuzzy figures in the glass disappeared from view.

The door was locked from the inside. The lock next to the handle, which was parallel to the floor, indicated that it was still locked.

Inside the long, narrow cabin was a forty-something man in light green work wear—the cabin crew. He sat on a folding chair and was slumped over a rather small work desk. There was no one else inside.

His eyes were wide open. There was a hole in the back of his head. Blood had spewed from the hole and onto his face, his uniform, and the desk, leaving a dark stain on the carpet.

“Should we ask them to bring our breakfast to the observation car? We could eat and enjoy the view on the balcony.”

“That sounds great. Maybe we should do that with lunch, too.”

“Sandwiches again?”

“Yeah.”

After exiting the hallway of car 12, they no longer had any need to worry about waking the other passengers. Allison and Wil passed through the coupling, chatting about food. Then, they passed by the doors into the observation car, opened the door on the right, and stepped inside. To their left was the bar, and ahead were the sofas and the balcony.

“Then maybe I’ll try that too—”

Stepping inside first, Allison paused mid-sentence. She froze. Wil also saw what was happening inside.

“Ah…”

There were two people on the balcony. The curtains in the observation car had all been closed, and it was very dark. That was why the balcony, which was outside and brighter, was all the more visible.

Sitting against the railings on the balcony was a man in a black uniform. Welch, one of the conductors. Allison and Wil could see his face.

His eyes were bulging, and his tongue lolled from his mouth.

The other man was wearing a black suit. His back was turned, but it was clear that his face was covered. His hands, covered by black gloves, held the conductor by the collar and pulled him up. The conductor's body was hung limply over the railings, offering no resistance. His arms shook powerlessly. His head drooped. Behind him passed the mountains and valleys.

"It can't be—"

The moment Wil whispered, Allison flung aside her coat and scrambled through the observation car. There were twenty meters to the balcony. She cried loudly,

"What do you think you're doing?!"

The man in black turned. His jacket was neatly closed, and he was covered from head to toe in black. He wore a balaclava that concealed everything but his eyes and nose, and had a slightly tinted pair of goggles over his eyes. His face was completely hidden, but from his build he was clearly a man.

The man spotted Allison and froze for a single second.

"No!"

Then, he defied her. He gave the conductor's body a light push.

As Allison and Wil watched, frozen, Welch's body slowly slid back, but sped up suddenly as his legs passed by where his upper body used to be.

They heard nothing. Three seconds after the conductor's body disappeared past the railings, a twisted body, set of limbs, and limp neck clothed in a black uniform tumbled down the tracks.

Allison arrived at the balcony entrance.

"Allison! Stop!" Wil cried, rushing after her. At the same time, Allison pulled on the doorknob. All it did was clatter, refusing to open. She tried fiddling with the lock under the knob, but did not get anywhere. The door was locked from the outside.

"Take this! And this!"

As Allison attempted several times to get the door open, Wil made it to the door and grabbed her by the shoulder.

"It's too dangerous, Allison! Let's go get help."

Allison looked up. Three meters ahead of them, beyond the window, stood the man—he was looking at them.

"Murderer! We caught you in the act! I saw it all with my own eyes!"

“Allison. Let’s push the sofa up to the door and call for help. That way, he’ll be stuck there.” Wil said, and began pulling on a two-seater nearby. But it did not move.

“Huh?” Wil breathed, surprised.

“What?!” Allison roared. She was not talking to Wil. Wil looked at the man on the balcony, whom Allison was glaring at.

With his right hand, the man in the balaclava pointed at the sofa. Then he lightly wagged his pointer finger.

“What?! What are you trying to say?!” Allison demanded. Wil quickly realized what the man was telling them.

“I see… These sofas rotate, but you can’t move them. They’re fixed to the floor.”

“Argh!”

The moment Allison angrily turned to the sofa, the man waved his right hand as though saying goodbye. He quickly took hold of a support on the balcony, climbed atop the railings, and hung from the car by his hands. Then, he pulled himself easily up to the roof.

“Hey! He’s getting away! Stop right there!” Allison cried, and put all her weight into her right foot as she kicked the balcony door. The door creaked.

“Just a little more!”

She continued to kick at the door mercilessly.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

At the fifth kick, the ornately decorated door bent as the little crossbar that served as a lock was flung aside in a flash of splinters. Wil watched, his expression a mix of shock and awe.

Allison pulled on the door. It opened. She went out into the balcony, buffeted by cold gusts. Wil followed after her. Allison immediately put a foot on the railing to give chase.

“Allison! It’s too dangerous!” Wil said.

“It is! So you stay right there, Wil! Don’t climb after me!” Allison replied immediately. And she clambered onto the roof even faster than the man had.

The first thing she saw on the roof was the view of the magnificent valley. To her right was the river, flowing with clear water. To her left was a steep green hill. And ahead were the white roofs of the cars.

“There!”

And there stood the man in black. The roofs of the cars were flat at the middle, and there was a slip-proof walkway strip about fifty centimeters wide for the benefit of those who worked on the train. The man was hunched over as he walked one car ahead—in other words, over car 12. On either side of the walkway were little grooves that he could hold. The man was continuing along the path.

“Hold it right there!” Allison ordered. The man, who had been moving slowly, looked up in shock. He quickly turned.

“Yeah, you! Murderer!”

With her golden hair aflutter, Allison half-knelt on the roof as she pointed at the man with her right hand.

“Where do you think you’re off to?” She taunted, staring.

The man twisted to his right and held up his right hand. His fingers were pointed like he was going to shoot a gun, but there was nothing in his hand.

“Wh-what? …Yes?”

In the midst of Allison’s confusion, the man closed his right hand and held up his thumb. It was a gesture that meant ‘good job’ in both East and West.

“Wh-what… what?”

Though Allison understood the gesture, the man’s intentions remained a mystery to her. Watching Allison attempt to puzzle out his actions, the man opened his fist and held his palm parallel to the ground, raising and lowering it several times.

“…?”

Then, he pointed ahead.

“Whoa!”

Allison understood immediately. It looked like the locomotive, about three hundred meters ahead, was inside the mountain. It was going into a tunnel.

The dark hole quickly swallowed up the white roofs of the cars. Eventually, the car on which the man stood drew close to the tunnel.

“Look out—”

The man instantly fell flat on his stomach. He lay over the center path, grasping the grooves with both hands.

“Damn it!”

Allison grumbled as she also fell flat on her stomach and held on tightly with both hands. When she looked ahead, the man had already disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel. The gaping hole approached.

“Ugh!”

With a deafening roar, the tunnel engulfed Allison.

Even when she looked around, there was nothing but darkness. The buzzing of the wind and the metallic noise of the wheels passing over the grooves in the rails assaulted her

eardrums. Her hair flew into her face and into her mouth. She could smell the exhaust from the diesel engine.

"Damn it!"

Lying flat against the roof, Allison waited for the tunnel to end. Ten seconds passed, twenty, then a hundred.

"Talk about a long tunnel… How much longer…? Please hurry up and end already… It better not be a tunnel all the way to Sfrestus… Diesel engines kind of stink… It's getting kinda cold…"

At the end of Allison's lengthy complaints, the tunnel finally finished. Because she was facing the side, the valley and the river came back into view. And,

"He's gone…"

The man was nowhere to be found. All she could see were the roofs of the cars, lined up straight along the tracks.

"Damn it…"

Thud.

Allison swore, punching the roof. There was a dull noise. Making sure that there were no tunnels ahead, Allison got up again.

"Allison! Allison!"

Suddenly, she heard a voice. When she turned, she saw Wil at the last car of the train, five meters away. His head was poking outside as he called to her.

"Allison, are you—whoa!"

His head suddenly dipped out of sight.

"Eek!"

Allison scrambled to the last car and looked under the sunshade, clinging to the roof.

"Wil!"

He was lying on the balcony.

"Ouch…"

With a sigh of relief, Allison twisted herself down. Then, she used the railings as a foothold as she landed precariously on the balcony. Wil sat up.

"Are you all right, Wil?"

"I slipped… I thought I was going to fall onto the tracks… That gave me a scare."

"How could you do something so dangerous?!" Allison said in a scolding tone.

“I won’t do it again. Ever.” Wil replied, nodding. “What about you, Allison? You probably haven’t hit your head, but you weren’t hurt at all?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Allison answered immediately. Then she asked, “Hm? How’re you so sure I didn’t hit my head?”

Wil slowly got to his feet.

“Since these tracks are used by the military, the tunnels are made to be very large so that even tall armored trains can pass through. The tops of the tunnels are high enough that you could stand on the roof. I read about it in a railroad reference book before. I checked the height when we were getting close, and I was pretty sure you’d be all right in that one.”

“What?! Then I could have just gone through it sitting down?”

“Yeah.”

“I was lying flat on the roof for dear life!”

“Well… you probably didn’t have to do that.”

“Right before we got to the tunnel, the man gestured to me to get down. And he got down, too! So I was so sure I had to duck! I was on my stomach the whole time!”

“Er…”

“I looked around after we got out of the tunnel, but I couldn’t see him anywhere!”

“He got you, Allison. He must’ve known that you didn’t have to duck. He probably escaped while you were distracted.”

“…Damn it!” Allison swore, kicking the door. It swung loudly into the observation car. The glass shattered. Wil winced.

“So what happened to him? Don’t tell me he jumped into the tunnel?”

“Probably not. It’s not impossible, but it’s really dangerous to jump out of a train moving at this speed.”

“Then did he get inside through a window?”

“Probably, but…”

“What?”

“No, nothing. He probably came inside.”

“In other words, there’s a murderer on this train.”

“Yeah…”

“Let’s go find him!”

“That’s too dangerous…”

“I’m not saying we should arrest him or anything. All we have to do is hunt him down and say, ‘we found him!’. Then he’ll have nowhere to run.”

“Before that, I think we should call the other cabin crew.”

“Right… let’s go!”

Allison began to run down the observation car. Wil followed after her and wondered,

“About Mr. Welch… I think he was already dead when he was thrown off.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I thought so too.”

“Then why did the killer go through the trouble to push the body off the train? I just don’t get it.”

“We’ll ask the man himself.” Allison replied, picking up her coat from the carpeted floor.

From the observation car, Allison and Wil headed to car 12.

Allison was holding her coat in her hands. She said that, if they ran into the killer, she would throw it to prevent him from escaping.

They ran into no one as they passed their own room and arrived at the cabin crew lounge. Allison banged loudly on the door, but there was still no answer.

They went through the hall and to car 11’s cabin crew lounge. They knocked again, but there was no response there either.

“There’s no one around. What’s going on here?”

They then went to car 10. As they made their way down the hallway, Wil wondered,

“What about Benedict?”

“He might be asleep, but we can’t wait for him to wake up.”

“Right.”

They opened the hallway door and ran for the cabin crew’s lounge. They knocked, but no one came outside.

As Allison turned to head straight for car 9, Wil stopped her.

“Hold on.”

Allison froze, and asked him what was wrong. Wil slowly reached for the doorknob.

It was locked. The knob did not so much as budge.

“Let’s check car 9, just in case.”

Car 9 was the frontmost car of the regular passenger cars. They loudly ran down the hallway and arrived at the cabin crew's lounge. They knocked, but again there was no answer.

"What's going on here?"

Wil checked the doorknob. It was also locked, refusing to budge.

"Let's check the next car."

Car 8. There was no one in the lounge car, either. They knocked on the conductor's lounge in car 8, but there was no answer. The doorknob did not budge, either.

"D'you think they all decided to get off the train?" Allison joked.

"Or maybe they've all been murdered." Wil replied gravely.

Car 7. Welch's cabin was in this dining car, but Allison and Wil passed by it without knocking. They also passed by car 6, where there were only tables and a bathroom.

Car 5. Allison opened the door and peered into the kitchen. There was no one at work yet. All she saw was a large, neat, and orderly workstation.

"Excuse us."

She took a bottle of water from the crate next to a counter. She slammed it against the corner of a table to take care of the cap. She put her mouth to the bottle and took several gulps, then handed it to Wil. Having been panting from the constant running, Wil gladly took it and quenched his thirst.

"What do we do with this? Put it back in the crate?" Wil wondered, looking at the small amount of water left in the bottle. Allison advised him to stop joking and took the bottle, pouring out the rest into the sink. She then held it up upside-down.

"Weapon acquired. Let's go."

"You're going to hit him with that?"

"If I have to."

With that, Allison led the way out of the galley. They began running through the halls once more. At times, the train shook violently. Each time, Allison caught herself with ease; Wil had to cling to the handrails.

They crossed the coupling and entered car 4. Wil knocked on the VIP cabin crew's lounge. There was no answer.

"This is strange. I can't believe even this one would be empty…"

"Should we beat the VIP guy awake or something? I heard he has a bodyguard." Allison wondered, holding her coat in her left hand and a bottle in her right. Wil thought for a few seconds.

“Let’s not. I think we should head to the crew’s sleeping car before that.”

Allison and Wil ran through a total of ten cars—in other words, over 250 meters—and arrived at car 2. Car 2 alone was like ordinary sleeping cars, with small cabins equipped with bunk beds on the right side of the car. Allison knocked on the first cabin. Just as she began to think that even that cabin was empty, something happened.

“Yes…?

The door opened, and a middle-aged man in pajamas stepped outside. He was short and chubby. It was clear that, at least, he was not the man in black. There was sleep in his eyes still as he looked at Wil and Allison, who was holding up her bottle.

“Wh-what…? Who…? What? Passengers? Oh! Good morning!”

He seemed to have snapped himself awake. Allison lowered the bottle.

“Good morning. Who are you?”

“Er… I’m a cook.”

Allison looked at Wil.

“We finally found one.”

The cook was suddenly struck by realization. He looked at Allison.

“Excuse me, Miss. But what time is it?”

Allison glanced at her watch and told him the time. The cook paled visibly.

“Oh no… this is bad…”

Taking a deep breath, the cook mumbled to himself as he turned. Then, he bellowed at the top of his lungs to his sleeping co-workers.

“We’ve got trouble, everybody! Wake up now! We won’t have time to bake the bread for breakfast at this rate! Get up! Up!”

“Calm down. That’s not the problem right now.” Allison said for the moment, even though there was nothing to be calm about.

“What do you mean by that?” The cook retorted, incensed.

“Mr. Welch, one of the conductors, has been murdered.” Wil said calmly. The cook snorted incredulously.

“That’s not the best joke to start off the morning.”

“It’d be great if that was a joke.” Said Allison.

“Mr. Welch was in charge of waking you up this morning, wasn’t he?” Wil commented. The cook’s expression changed.

"What to do… we're not sure ourselves. The only people on this car are the cooks, servers, and the bartenders… people who have nothing to do with running the train itself."

After Allison and Wil briefly explained about the conductor and the man who killed him, the cook replied anxiously. The train was continuing down the tracks.

"In other words, there are no conductors or cabin crew in this car."

"No. And they don't have morning crew meetings, either. What should we do?"

Wil and Allison exchanged glances. Allison thought for a moment.

"Do you know where we are?"

The cook shook his head.

"Miss, we have nothing to do with running the train itself. Absolutely nothing. This is my second time aboard this train, but things to do with the Sou Be-Il railroad—in fact, the entire train—are under the management of conductors Welch and Clay. All we do is make delicious meals."

As the cook desperately argued on his own behalf, his co-workers, who had gotten up, stood around anxiously. One of them had gone knocking on the other crew's doors.

"Wh-what can we do?" The cook asked. Allison answered.

"First, we need someone to take charge over everyone. I know just the man, so we'll go beat him awake."

"All right. We're counting on you. But what should we do?"

"Please wake up the other crew. Have them change and gather in the first dining car." Wil replied. The cook nodded.

"And please, don't ever move alone. Make sure you're in pairs or groups. It's best to move with company if possible." Wil added. The cook nodded again and asked,

"Er… so no bread for breakfast today, I suppose?"

"What's taking him? Don't tell me…"

"Don't worry. He's probably just getting dressed."

Cabin 1 of car 10. After knocking loudly on Benedict and Fiona's door, Wil and Allison talked as they waited for the two to come outside. Again, they ran into no one as they came down from car 2.

Allison banged on the door again.

"Yes, who is there?"

Benedict's half-asleep voice came from inside the cabin. He was speaking in Roxchean. Allison answered loudly,

"It's us. Open up!"

"What…? It's way too early for breakfast…" Benedict mumbled, annoyed, and opened the door a crack.

He was wearing the dressing gown provided in the cabin. His full beard had been shaved off entirely.

"Do you mind keeping it down? Fi's still asleep." Benedict whispered, looking at Allison and Wil. "Allison… you shouldn't bother us at the crack of dawn just because *your* plan went down in flames. Let's solve this like gen-"

"This no time for that nonsense!" Allison burst out.

In front of cabin 1 of car 10. Allison and Wil stood in the hall, and Benedict in the half-open doorway. Allison and Wil waited for Fiona to change and finish getting ready. Benedict, who changed first, was keeping watch just in case.

Wil looked outside through the window in the hallway. All he could see were green slopes, but it was quite a bit brighter outside.

Benedict was wearing the same clothes as the previous day, this time with a jacket. But the missing beard and the neat hair made him seem like a different person entirely.

"Why in the world would anyone kill Mr. Welch? I'd expect any potential killer to come for me first." Benedict commented. Allison asked what he meant.

"I didn't really want to tell you guys, but after the discovery, I received some threats in the mail."

"!"

Wil turned, shocked.

"What? That's news. What did they say?" Allison asked. Benedict glanced at Fiona, who was changing in front of the beds, and answered.

"I've told Fi about this, but… it doesn't really need explaining, huh? 'What were you thinking, announcing such a foolish discovery to both sides at once?'. Others said things like 'go to hell', or 'you're a disgrace to Sou Be-Il', or 'you call yourself a soldier?'. It made a bit of news in Sou Be-Il, and even more people joined the bandwagon after that. But anyway, it died down after three months or so, and no one actually made an attempt on my life. But…"

The lower left side of Benedict's jacket was bulging slightly. He had fished out his military-issue revolver from his luggage, loaded it, and holstered it under his jacket.

"Sorry to make you wait." Fiona said, walking up to the door. Unlike the previous day, she was not wearing her silver-rimmed glasses or a long wig. She looked just as she did the past winter. As Benedict instructed, she was wearing a pair of navy pants instead of a skirt—

but otherwise she was dressed similarly to the previous day. From the belt around her waist hung the pouch containing her miniature camera.

“Are you all right?” Benedict asked, concerned. Fiona met his gaze and nodded firmly.

“I understand. Now, we must go face this problem. Do not fall away from my side.”

“I won’t.”

They gazed into one another’s eyes. Allison shot them an icy glare. When she turned, she saw Wil staring at the forest out the window.

“Damn it. He got them all.” Benedict swore in Bezelese.

“This is unbelievable.” Allison remarked bitterly. Wil said nothing. Fiona closed her eyes and recited silent prayers.

Car 12. Car 11. Car 10, where Benedict was. Car 9, just ahead. The four cabin crew who were in charge of the four cars had all been killed in their cabins, each shot once in the head.

Conductor Clay’s cabin in car 8. Like the others, they broke the glass to unlock the door and enter. His body lay facedown on the floor, also with a bullet in the back of the head. His short brown hair was dyed crimson with blood, and lying around next to him was a pillow with a hole in the middle. The hole was singed black.

“He threatened them into lying on the floor and shot them…” Benedict seethed. The body lay neatly on the long, narrow floor. The cabin was otherwise untouched, and the blood was only on the floor.

“What about shell casings?” Allison asked.

“I took a quick look, but I can’t find them. He might’ve used a revolver. The pillow he must have used in place of a silencer.” Benedict said, shaking his head. “Mr. Clay, we *will* avenge you…”

With that, he covered the body with a blanket embroidered with the emblem of the train and observed a moment of silence.

“What now?” Allison wondered. Benedict answered in Roxchean so Fiona could also understand.

“First let us go to a dining car to speak with the related personnel.”

“All right. We’ll leave the commanding to you.”

“What about the other passengers?” Wil asked.

“Whatever the case, it is best to not wake them. Let us leave them to just sleep. The possibility that they are also killed does exist, but I do not want to even punch them awake to investigate them.” Benedict said. “Ah, but there is one person we must wake. We will ask him for help as well.”

“Who?” Asked Allison.

“On this train is a Sou Be-Il soldier.”

“Oh, him.” Allison nodded briefly.

“Oh? Do you also know him, Allison?”

“I met him when I was all alone in the observation car last night.” Allison replied, emphatically stressing the word ‘alone’. Wil did not react. “He seems a little frail. D’you think he can help?”

Benedict thought for a moment before answering.

“Better than not being here.”

The four of them headed for the dining car together. They instructed the crew there to remain on standby, and went to the VIP car. The cabin crew’s lounge was still locked, and no one responded to knocking. When Allison asked if they would break the door there as well, Benedict decided to knock on the door of the VIP cabin first.

“What might be the matter? The master is still asleep.”

A white-haired man about sixty years of age soon stepped into the hallway. The scalp at the top of his head was fully exposed, and the rest of his hair was quite thin. He was a little shorter than Benedict.

“Apologies for bothering you. This is an emergency situation. You are?”

The man sounded somewhat offended.

“I am Thomas Ien, the secretary and bodyguard of the VIP passenger. I will take no questions about my master. And you are?”

“We are passengers. This is an emergency situation. Is your master safe?”

Ien’s face darkened.

“What are you implying?”

“The conductors and the cabin crews are murdered. We knocked the door of this car’s cabin crew, but there was no response. He is probably also murdered.”

As Ien’s eyes widened in shock,

“Is something the matter?”

Major Stork poked his head out the door. He was in his uniform shirt without the tie, and his hair was a mess. His eyes were still sleepy.

“The master is well. He is still asleep.”

Ien, who had closed the door and gone inside to check, came back outside. During that time, Major Stork put on a tie, his uniform jacket, and his kit belt, and came out into the hallway. Holstered on his belt was an automatic handgun.

Ien stood at the cabin entrance, his face set.

"So long as he remains in his room, the master will be safe. This is the only entrance, and the windows and walls are bulletproof. Nothing short of an explosion will harm him."

"Are you all right? If an enemy invades through this door?"

At Benedict's question, Ien reached into the little closet in the wall. Inside hung several suits.

There was a large automatic handgun in the hand he slowly withdrew. Underneath the grip was a large fixed magazine, and there was a wooden stock that allowed the user to securely place the gun on their shoulder.

Benedict backed away slightly at the sight.

"No one can enter this room now. Not a soul." Ien uttered mechanically. "Mr. Stork." He added in fluent Bezelese. "You are no exception. You may no longer enter this cabin."

"Pardon? Please, wait. I am on an official mission. My duties include providing security for—"

"Your mission does not matter to me. I will make no exceptions. If you try to enter, I will shoot you."

With that, Ien entered the room and brought out Major Stork's suitcase and coat. He haphazardly dropped them in front of the door.

"Then what am I to do…? Where am I supposed to sleep?"

"The dead have left many empty cabins." Ien said icily. "I hope you will clear up this situation in all haste, Mr. Hero." He added in Roxchean to Benedict, closing the door.

"I suppose Mr. Ien truly despises me. Although that isn't very surprising."

"What do you mean?"

They were in the galley hallway. Major Stork, who was in the lead, mumbled to himself and Benedict asked for clarification.

"I've heard that Mr. Ien was a major in the Roxchean military who took part in the Great War. Apparently, he had even been taken prisoner."

"That's why he is so fluent in Bezelese. And now that I think about it, that gun he had was military-issue—capable of automatic fire. If he pulls the trigger on that gun inside the train, there will be an uproar."

"He's a capable bodyguard, if nothing else… but in any case, what do you plan to do now? I'm not much of a fighter myself."

Behind Benedict walked Fiona, and behind her were Allison and Wil. Allison whispered to Wil in Roxchean.

"Say, between that frail major and that bodyguard… if one of them is the culprit, who would you say was the one, Wil?"

"What d'you mean?" Wil whispered back, astonished.

"They have similar physiques. And they're both carrying guns. One of them must be the murderer."

"But… we don't have any proof."

"I'm going to catch him when he slips up."

"Allison… I think you should give up on trying to catch him on the train."

"Why? What are we supposed to do then?" Allison asked.

"This is Sou Be-Il. We're not from here. So we should leave things to Benedict and—…just Benedict." Wil replied.

When they returned to the dining car, the crew there looked up in unison.

Just as advertised, the crew was experienced—all older people. The they were all in uniform. Eight cooks, two men and one woman in bartender uniforms, two musicians, four dining car servers wearing white standing-collar uniforms, and one short, elderly doctor in a black suit.

Everyone from car 2 was safe. The crew were gathered at the back of the car—because there were not enough seats, about half of them were leaning against the curtained windows.

Benedict and the others stopped at the middle of the car. Benedict spoke first.

"I am sorry to make you wait."

Someone asked him who he was. Benedict answered that he was a passenger, then glanced at Major Stork and Allison.

"Tell them who you are. That's why we called them here." Allison said.

Benedict shrugged and revealed his identity to the wary crew. He told them that he had shaved after the previous evening, among other things. The woman in the bartender suit made a show of being thrilled. Benedict began by suggesting that he take command. No one opposed him.

"What will you do now?" Asked the cook whom Allison had shaken awake. At Major Stork's request, Wil interpreted for him in Roxchean.

"This is a murder case. We'll have to contact the police, but we have no way of doing so at the moment."

Benedict told them to open the curtains. The people by the windows drew back the thick curtains. It was just before dawn—a bright morning. They could see the river, much narrower than before.

"Until we pass through the mountains, there will be no villages or train stations. The nearest station with police officers… we will arrive at in evening. It will take a similar time if we go backwards."

A heavy silence fell over the crew.

"Then we'll just search for the culprit." Allison said, her enthusiasm clear.

Benedict shook his head.

"I don't know, if the killer is still in the train. But even if he is still in the train, I think it is the best that you quit searching for the killer."

"Why?" Allison retorted to the same answer Wil had given her before. Benedict answered.

"We are not detectives. But that is not the biggest reason. The biggest reason is that we are not detectives, so I do not wish to think twice about the people on this train. For an example, if we search corner by corner the cars, but no one is hiding. If the killer hasn't jumped off the train, preparing to be badly hurt…"

"Then someone on the train must be the killer."

"Yes. The man you say you saw had middle height and middle build. There are some men like that in the passengers and the crew. Then first we must think twice about them all. And I do not wish to say this, but if we do that, we must also think twice about you and Wil, who saw the killing. Because our only proofs are the corpses. Further, even I could be the killer. I am similar in height and build, and I have a gun. Of course, I am not the killer. And if we ask questions to everyone and check all the cargo… we will arrive at the station before we are finished. Rather, I think it is important for everyone to safely go to the station."

"I see." Allison said tersely, and said no more. She did not, however, look entirely convinced. When she glanced at Wil, who finished interpreting for Major Stork, he nodded solemnly as though saying that Benedict had said what he wanted to say. Benedict continued.

"First, now wake up all the passengers and tell them to come to this dining car without explaining anything. It will be the best to stay gathered in this dining car, I think. And if everyone is security for the front and back doors, we will be able to react even if the killer is outside or inside."

"All day? That might be difficult…" One of the crew said. Benedict nodded, but replied that they had no other choice.

"We only must wait until we cross the mountains and go to a village. We will not sleep here overnight, so please be happy about this."

At that point, everyone was mostly convinced. Major Stork, who was listening to Wil's interpretation, suddenly spoke up.

"Please, hold on. I agree that we should not search for the culprit, but there is a place nearby where we can stop. We do not need to wait for the train to cross the mountains—and I'm certain we will be able to secure everyone's well-being at the place I'm thinking of."

Of course, the only people who understood what he said were the Bezelese speakers—Benedict, Allison, and Wil.

Allison and Wil looked a little surprised. Benedict's expression changed.

As Wil wondered if he should interpret the major's words into Roxchean, Benedict sternly responded in Bezelese.

"Wait a moment, Major Stork!"

Major Stork replied indifferently.

"There is a depot along this very line…"

"Do you understand what you're saying, Major? Please—"

"Stop fighting!" Allison scolded them.

Having been interrupted, Benedict grumbled to himself and shook his head. Major Stork looked confused.

"Please explain." Fiona said, quietly but with an undeniable firmness in her tone. Somewhat bitter, Benedict looked at Wil and asked him to interpret.

As the crew listened, Wil explained the conversation.

"And?" Allison asked Benedict.

"Please ask the major…" Benedict replied weakly. Allison did as he said.

"Just one thing. What is a depot?"

"It is a word from an ancient language, used now as military jargon. It refers to a base where supplies are stored. There are several such bases along this line, which crosses the Iltoa Mountain Range. There's one quite close by, in fact. It's large enough to house a train, and there is a defense force on standby from which we can request protection. Though it's too deep in the mountains for radio, there's nothing to worry about—there is a phone line there that connects with the nearest base."

When Wil interpreted for the major, the crew bombarded him with questions.

"Wait a second. I've been on this route several times now, but I've never seen anything like what you described. The only thing up ahead is a continuous climb, and even after we cross the rugged mountains, there's nothing but a valley and a lake."

"That's because we put down new sets of tracks for this train so that the depots would not be discovered."

As Major Stork answered the questions without holding back a thing, Benedict leaned against the window and sighed.

"Let us move as quickly as we can and stop the train there. If we hurry, we will arrive within the hour. Then we can decide on what to do. What do you say, everyone?"

When Wil interpreted the major's suggestion, everyone agreed. Benedict lightly shook his head and mumbled to himself.

"Heh…"

The crew shot him chilling glares. But no one went so far as to criticize him.

"I can understand what you wish to tell. You wish to ask me why I said to go to a far village, even though I know about the depots. I am embarrassed at myself."

"It's because the supply bases are a military secret, right?" Wil chimed in, defending Benedict. Benedict gave him a thumbs-up.

"That's right. In the Great War, this area was a defense frontline that should be protected if the enemy crossed over the Lutoni River no matter what. And it is even now. To protect from being hit with railroad guns by the enemy, every mountain base is an important secret. More than everyone's safety, I put first the military's rules and secrets. I am sorry."

Benedict apologized. But it was clear from the looks in the crew's eyes that their opinions of him had taken a nosedive. Fiona, who stood beside him, gently put a hand on his shoulder.

"You have a gun too, don't you? Don't tell me…" One of the crew began.

"Stop it. Weren't you listening to what we said before?" Fiona sharply cut him off. The crew was silenced by her tone.

"It is all right. And…"

Benedict unzipped his jacket and took off his belt. Then, he undid the holster on his left side and handed it, gun and all, to Wil.

"Take my gun. There are six bullets inside."

"What? Me?"

"You are a Roxchean person. And you are my friend. In other words, I think you are a suitable person to entrust my gun. Please be careful not to use it wrongly."

Just as Wil was about to reply, Fiona nodded lightly. Seeing that, Wil quietly reached out and received the gun.

Benedict looked at Major Stork and said in Roxchean,

"I agree with your suggestion."

Wil interpreted for him.

"Then that's what we'll do. I will explain the situation to the defense force. Please don't worry—I may look like this, but I *am* a major." Major Stork said, lighthearted in spite of the heavy air in the car.

He went on to make several suggestions, before conferring with the crew and deciding on what to do.

First, they would use the train's radio in the conductor's cabin to contact the engineers and ask if they could increase the speed so they could arrive earlier. If possible, they would not wake the passengers until they arrived at the base. And even if they did, they would instruct the passengers to keep their curtains closed and remain in their cabins. They would not set out to search for the culprit. They would never act alone, and would move around in groups of three or more.

"Er… about breakfast…" A cook said hesitantly.

"Breakfast! That sounds wonderful. People get hungry, no matter the situation. We'll be counting on you, everyone." Major Stork replied.

The train running through the mountains gained speed.

"We *are* in the mountains, so we won't be as fast as we could be on the plains. But the engineers will do their best. Although they seemed extremely displeased about heading to the depot." Major Stork said. They had broken the glass to open the locked door and entered the conductor's cabin, at which point Major Stork spoke with the locomotive. The engineers were only informed of Major Stork's orders—the topic of Benedict was left out entirely.

In the meantime, the cooks moved in groups as they went about their usual duties, and the others searched the train together. The doctor checked the corpses in all of the cabin crew's lounges.

"Estimated time of death is overnight. They were all killed with single shots to the head. From the wounds, I can only conclude that the weapon was a handgun. I could check the size and type of the rounds if I performed an autopsy, but that's not possible here." The doctor said. Afterwards, they searched the crew's luggage—but their keys were all still there.

Allison and Wil searched all the bathrooms and rooms in the cars. They found no one. Afterwards, they split off into groups of three or four and watched to see if any of the passengers left their cabins.

Benedict, Fiona, and Major Stork said little as they silently passed the time in car 9.

Allison and Wil were in car 12—where their own cabin was—with two of the servers. They leaned against the wall in the shaking car, waiting only for the train to arrive at the supply base. Wil had the holster at his left side.

"How did this happen…? They were all such good people." One of the servers mumbled. He was the one who had brought Allison and the others their incredible meal the previous evening.

"It's highly unlikely that the conductors were murdered because of a grudge." Wil said. The server asked what the motive was.

"I'm not sure yet." Wil replied honestly. No one questioned him further.

For some time, Wil leaned against the wall, lost in thought. Allison, gazing at his face, thought of speaking up—but she quickly stopped herself.

Soon, Wil leaned in close to Allison, who was next to him, and asked quietly.

"Why are we still alive?"

"Hm?"

"Why didn't the culprit kill us then, too? He could have done it easily."

"Now that you mention it…"

"Of course, I doubt he expected us to come to the observation car so early in the morning. But why didn't he kill us then? That way, it would have taken more time for people to discover the murders, and no one would have witnessed him… that's been bugging me for a while."

"You're right. We'll ask the guy once we catch him."

The train screamed at each curve as it continued down the mountain tracks. They left the side of the narrow river visible through the trees, and again entered a long tunnel. The train began to slow in the middle of the darkness.

It slowly emerged outside and soon came to a stop.

Wil looked out the window. The sun was already up and it was bright outside, but all they could see were thin trees and plants covering the ground, and tall stone peaks standing several kilometers ahead. Wil entered their cabin and looked through the window on the other side. Yet more stone peaks. There was still quite a bit of snow left on the northern side.

"I get it… this must be a large hollow. The perfect place for hiding a base."

At that point, the train began to move again.

The hollow was oval-shaped and was several kilometers long. It was surrounded by mountains on all sides. The entire area was sunken, sequestered from its surroundings without a single pass connecting outside.

At the eastern and western ends of the hollow were tunnels that led outside. As soon as the train emerged, the rails forked into two tracks. One of them led straight across the lowest part of the hollow on the north, and into the tunnel on the opposite side.

In the center of the hollow was an 'invisible base'—one of the Sou Be-Il Royal Army's mountain depots.

The fork in the tracks led there in a nearly-straight line. The rails split off into branches, much like at a station, and four sets of rails ran parallel to one another for several hundred meters. There were no platforms, but the ground was paved with concrete.

The tracks were nearly empty. All there were were a box-shaped tender, a small diesel locomotive for switching out tenders, and several small trucks that had been affixed with appropriate wheels so they could run down the tracks.

Clustered on the southern side of the tracks were several buildings. Fuel tanks painted green for camouflage and half-buried concrete ammunition depots were most numerous, about twenty of each lined up in rows. There were also semicircular residences for the dozens of soldiers serving on the base. There were also facilities where steam locomotives could be restocked with water and coal. Several layers of protective fences surrounded the base to keep it safe from avalanches from the surrounding mountains.

The white-roofed luxury train slowly approached the supply base as one long line.

Never rung outside of drills, the base’s alarm wailed loudly for the first time in years.

Chapter 5: Reasons for Company

Amidst the wailing alarm, the transcontinental express followed the northernmost of the four parallel tracks as it slowly pulled into the supply base.

Soldiers in brown uniforms rushed outside and watched in bafflement. When an engineer at the locomotive waved a red flag, the men seemed to realize that something was wrong—voices here and there began calling for superior officers.

Watching from behind the window, Benedict asked,

"Could I leave things to you?"

Major Stork, next to him, nodded.

"Of course. Please wake the passengers and have them gather in the dining car. No one must leave the train until then."

"Understood."

Benedict and Fiona, along with Allison and Wil and the other crew, divided into groups as they went around waking up all the passengers, Thankfully, none of them had opened their eyes and left their cabins before arriving at the base, and none of them remained silent after several loud bangs on their doors.

As the passengers came out into the hallways, wondering if it was already time for breakfast, the crew only told them that it was an emergency and that they were to gather in the dining car.

"What's the situation, sir?"

When Major Stork stepped out of the train first, her was greeted by an officer in his late thirties. He was a rank lower at captain.

"An emergency. An unforeseen incident occurred aboard, so I had the train brought here under my authority. I'd like to request some body bags."

Saluting and stating his rank, Major Stork explained briefly about the murders. The captain, while surprised, also looked incredulous. Major Stork asked,

"Who is the commanding officer here?"

"He went down the mountain two days ago for an officers' meeting and his vacation. I'm currently the acting commander."

"I see. Thank you for your assistance. I assume that the telephone is available?"

Major Stork pointed at a concrete building that stood across three railroad tracks. It was a single-story building with a camouflaging green net over the roof—the base's command center.

“I’m afraid not, sir. It’s been out since yesterday—the wires must be broken.” The captain replied grimly. Major Stork turned.

“What did you say, Captain?”

“The telephones are out of service, sir. It happens sometimes. The wires by the rails must’ve been cut by falling rocks.”

“Have you sent a dispatch rider?”

“No, sir. We’re not able to do so at the moment. Usually, we’d send in a truck to check, but…”

The captain trailed off, his gaze sliding to the long train before him. Major Stork understood.

“I see. This train came first.”

“Yes, sir. All use of the railroad, including this one, has been prohibited for the day. The soldiers have been given the day to rest.”

“I understand. First, I would like you to order every soldier on the base: That they are not to enter the train under any circumstances. And that they are to conduct themselves as gentlemen, on the honor of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. I will give more orders at the command center. Please wait there with the engineers.”

Loudly acknowledging Major Stork, the captain gathered the soldiers. Major Stork looked back at the fourteen-car train and mumbled to himself.

“Really, such a long train.”

“What in the world is going on here? At least let us relax in the morning.”

“Even if it’s an emergency, don’t we at least deserve an explanation? What are the conductors doing? They should be apologizing to us before anything. It’s not something you people are qualified for.”

Complaining to the servers who walked in front of and behind them, a couple in their sixties entered the dining car. All the passengers were now gathered in car 6.

There were a total of sixteen passengers and a total of eighteen crew members(including the cooks who were called back from the galley). The passengers, including Allison, Wil, and Fiona, set aside the tables and sat down on the chairs they brought from the next car.

“Everyone is here now? Without the two people in the VIP car.” Asked Benedict. The server answered that he was correct.

When Benedict stepped up to explain, the crew, who had earlier shot him icy looks, nodded compliantly.

Benedict introduced himself again. And as the passengers reeled in shock, he explained the situation. The passengers, finally informed of what had happened, were nervous—but they quietly lent their ears to Benedict.

Major Stork entered the dining car partway through. Benedict introduced him to the passengers and continued the explanation.

"So, I followed Major Stork's judgement and we stopped this train at this supply base. It is not sure yet what we will do after, but if we are here, we will first secure our safety. In half the day, the village base will send the security force."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief at Benedict's assurance. At that moment,

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but we can't make contact with the village." Major Stork said gravely. Those who knew Bezelese frowned.

"What do you mean, 'we can't make contact with the village'? Wil, please interpret us." Benedict said in Roxchean. Wil interpreted Benedict's words, then interpreted Major Stork's explanation about the telephone into Roxchean. The air in the dining car changed.

Passenger and crew alike began to question what they should do. Someone commented that they did not wish to remain at the base with the others, when any one of them could be the culprit. Everyone agreed.

"But is that any different from heading to the village by train as a group, when the killer might be among us? We can't get into contact with the village, and it will be evening by the time we get there. I think it will be a better idea to stay here." Said the president in her forties in an authoritative voice. Everyone went silent as though convinced.

"At this point, we have no idea why this has happened. Who are the culprit's targets? Was he only planning to murder the conductors and the cabin crew? Or was he after the entire train?"

It was just as Wil finished interpreting for the major.

"The culprit… is after me."

Someone spoke. Everyone looked around, searching for the owner of the voice.

"He is targeting me. There's no mistaking it."

The voice came from behind Benedict and Major Stork—in other words, from the door leading to the previous car.

When Benedict and Stork stood aside, a man by the door came into view. He was about fifty years of age, and was short and rotund. He had thinning brown hair and a mustache that stood at the ends, and wore a black suit. The moment they saw Ien standing behind him, Benedict and the others realized who he must be.

The man grimaced as he solemnly walked toward the middle of the dining car. Ien followed expressionlessly, his hand in the large sack he had slung over his shoulder. It obviously contained the handgun. He was likely prepared to open fire at the slightest hint of trouble.

As everyone watched, the man stopped between Benedict and Major Stork. Benedict asked,

"I guess that you are the VIP car's passenger, but what in the world is happening?"

"It seems that some have already realized, but…"

The man paused before he revealed his identity.

"I am Gauthier Terreur, the head of the Terreur Steel Foundation. I am the passenger on the VIP car."

Allison, Wil, and the others who did not know him by face were shocked. Only Benedict, Fiona, and Major Stork—who knew about Terreur from earlier—were unsurprised.

"And I am the target of the killer. Look here."

With that, Terreur took out a folded piece of paper from inside his jacket. He thought for a moment about who to hand it to, before holding it out to Benedict. Scrawled in rough handwriting on the note were the words,

'Terreur: Do not even think about returning to Roxche alive. I will kill those around you, one after another. First, I've taken care of the conductors and the cabin crew. If you doubt me, see for yourself. You are next.'

After reading the note out loud, Benedict said,

"I see… this is most certainly a threatening letter."

"I discovered this a short while ago in the newspaper tray by my door. The killer must have left it overnight." Said Terreur.

There was a moment of silence.

"So which one of you was it…? You're in here, aren't you? Or are you *all* conspiring together?"

No one could tell of Terreur was being mocking or serious. The silence grew heavier.

Dozens of seconds passed. Major Stork finally broke the silence, sounding irritated.

"You should have told me this from the start."

Benedict followed in Roxchean.

"To say, the killer's target is only you, and the other people who are still possibly the killer at least have no worry of being killed. The killer killed the crews to show you, and Allison and Wil by coincidence watched. That is one step forward."

Major Stork tapped Wil on the shoulder. Wil quickly interpreted for him.

Ien spoke resolutely.

"We have a request. We do not wish to be with you, and I am sure you do not wish to be with us. After all, no one wants to be suspected of murder."

"I agree." Said Benedict. And once Wil finished interpreting, Major Stork also voiced agreement.

"Yes. You're right."

Allison, who was unable to join the conversation for quite some time, put a hand to her mouth and yawned. Then she looked at the people who were glaring at her.

"Excuse me."

"Then what shall we do?"

"What do you want to do?"

Asked Major Stork in Bezelese, and Benedict in Roxchean. In place of the silent Terreur, Ien replied,

"Allow us to remain apart from the other people by any means possible. Staying together here changes nothing—this plan is for everyone's benefit."

Then, Ien repeated himself in Bezelese. And finally, he turned to Major Stork and said stiffly,

"After all, is it not your 'mission' to solve this predicament?"

Major Stork shrugged and mumbled about how Ien was contradicting his earlier comment. Then, he thought for a moment.

"Then shall we go on ahead? The others can wait here."

"What are you saying?"

When Wil interpreted Major Stork's suggestion, Terreur spoke up. Stork answered.

"We will separate the train and flee by ourselves to the village at the foot of the mountains."

Major Stork explained his reasoning. Wil put all his efforts into interpreting for him:

If the culprit was after Terreur, and if one of the crew or passengers was the culprit, they could not be left in the same space—not even on the same train.

That was why, in order to evacuate Terreur to the village at the foot of the mountains, they would separate the train at the dining car or the lounge car. The front of the train, which included the VIP car, would head for the village at full speed.

The other passengers' cabins were further back on the train, so they could simply return to their rooms. The base could provide them with electricity and water, so their only problem would be boredom. The crew, whose quarters were near the front of the train, would be less comfortable—but they should consider it a part of their work and bear the inconvenience for the moment. If things went well, someone would come for them by morning.

Though it was impossible to predict the future, their once-in-a-lifetime trip could, unfortunately, be cancelled. He was very apologetic on behalf of Sou Be-Il, said Major Stork.

"I'll take care of that. If it's proven that you have nothing to do with the killings, I will take responsibility and ensure that you will be able to take this trip again."

At Terreur's offer, Major Stork turned to the passengers and crew.

"That is what he says. What do you say, everyone?"

No one opposed the proposal. "Then it is decided," said Major Stork as he made note of several details. He suggested that the passengers bring out any of their cargo if they were worried about them. Saying that he would order for carts, he instructed the crew to carry out materials and ingredients, including food.

"Finally, Major Carr."

Benedict waited for Wil to finish interpreting before he responded to his name.

"Yes?"

"I would like for you to join me."

Benedict looked a little surprised. Major Stork continued in a mechanical tone.

"I have two reasons. First, I simply need more manpower. Without even crew members to help, it will be difficult to fight off a potential emergency even with the three of us. Second, I cannot leave the Hero of the Mural here to be suspected of murder. This is a matter of national pride. I do not believe that you are the killer."

Wil did not interpret Major Stork's explanation. Benedict replied in Bezelese.

"I understand. I will join you until we reach the village."

"Thank you. But about your friends… what will they do? I don't really mind if they choose to come or stay."

"I will speak to them later."

Once Benedict and Major Stork were finished, Wil briefly explained that Benedict would accompany Major Stork to the village. Fiona stared in shock. Benedict smiled lightly and winked.

"I have a question. What about us?" Allison asked, suddenly raising her hand. Major Stork nodded.

"I was just about to ask. I'd like for the two of you to join us."

"Why?" Wil asked. Major Stork replied,

"I have three reasons."

"That's one more than Benedict." chuckled Allison.

"First, I do not at all suspect the two of you, who were the first to discover the murders. After all, the two of you alone could not have killed so many. Second, you two are witnesses. That means that you may also be in danger. Third, you are friends of Major Carr. I thought that you might want to remain at his side. I will leave the decision to you. In addition, you two are capable of speaking Bezelese. Though your interpreting skills would be an asset here, it would also help me greatly during the journey to the village. So I suppose that makes four reasons, not three."

Wil looked at Allison. She met his gaze and answered immediately.

“All right. Then we’re coming with you. Is that all right with you, Wil?”

Wil nodded.

“Yes. We’ll follow Benedict.”

“Then it’s decided. Is this to your satisfaction? Have I been faithful to my mission?” Major Stork asked, turning around. Terreur, who had been silently listening to Ien’s interpretation, answered in a haughty tone.

“Excellent. Once we safely reach the village, I will reward you handsomely.”

* * *

The sun slowly rose into the air, its blinding light shining on the supply base in the hollow.

The crew focused their efforts into transporting cargo from car 2 to the passenger cars. There were over two hundred meters between them—carts laden with the passengers’ luggage went to and fro on the concrete pavement by the rails. The cooks moved food and ingredients that were stored in the galley.

Allison and Wil took their things and moved them from their cabin to the freight car. The door to the cargo hold was left wide open, and there were several shelves inside. Allison and Wil put their luggage on the shelves and secured them with the built-in elastic straps

At the center of the cargo hold was a metal enclosure secured with a lock. Inside was a mountain of cargo covered in cloth.

“So this is all Mr. Terreur’s…” Wil mumbled.

“Props if he could actually carry all that on his own. Maybe he’s thinking of setting up shop in Sou Be-Il.” Allison said, astonished.

It was just as they returned to the door of the freight car.

“You there. Boy.”

Someone called to Wil. When he turned, there stood the female president who had ordered him around the previous day. The man who seemed to be her husband instructed one of the crew to take a cart full of luggage and left ahead for the passenger cars.

Allison made a face. Wil answered.

“Yes, madam?”

“There wasn’t enough room on the cart for this one suitcase. Could you help me carry it back to the passenger cars? Let’s talk for a while on the way.”

The woman was pointing at a small leather suitcase on the concrete. She was carrying nothing.

“Hey! Wil’s not your servant! You can carry that puny thing on your own.” Allison protested.

“It’s all right, Allison. If she needs help, I should help her.”

“You’re way too nice, Wil.”

“Not really…”

“Then I’ll come with you.”

“Just wait here, Allison. You have to watch our things.”

With that, Wil left Allison and jumped out of the car. He picked up the woman’s suitcase and gave Allison a light wave.

“Shall we?” Said the woman as she began to walk. Wil followed after her, suitcase in hand. Allison watched and mumbled to herself.

“Talk about being a doormat. …Though I guess I really like that about him.”

About twenty meters later.

“May I assist you with anything else, madam?” Wil asked, catching up to the woman and walking at her side. The woman snickered and looked up at the sky.

“Please, that’s enough, Wil. Hearing ‘madam’ from you is almost giving me goosebumps.”

Wil chuckled and nodded.

“All right, ma’am.”

“Very good. Now, I have a lot of questions I’d like to ask you, but let’s set that aside for now. We’ll talk about it later. There’s something I simply have to tell you now.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Wouldn’t it be better for you and that girl to remain behind here? I’d prefer to keep you out of the dirty business that fills the world of us grownups, but Mr. Terreur is a man with many enemies. It’s not surprising in the least that someone is after his life. To be perfectly frank, it wouldn’t be very strange for there to be a hitman lurking among the passengers or the crew. On the surface, he’s the president of Roxche’s largest steel company. But he’s involved in all sorts of shady business—coerced transactions, countless illegal actions, and a very close relationship with the military, which he sells cannons to.”

“I see… I’d heard the rumors.”

“Mr. Terreur actually has no business being on a tour like this.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s soon going to be arrested. The government turned a blind eye to his actions in case of another Great War, but the Hero of the Mural brought peace to the world. So it’s only a matter of time before Mr. Terreur is captured. Even the politicians who covered for him from the shadows seem to have abandoned him. Three generations of Terreur Steel, now on the verge of collapse. That’s why you don’t have to get involved, Wil. Say something —anything—to convince the girl and remain here.”

For some time, Wil did not answer. But once they had walked the length of half a car, he spoke.

“There’s something I’d like to confirm. I’m not doing this for Mr. Terreur.”

“Is this something important to you as well, Wil?”

“Yes.”

This time, his answer was immediate. The woman nodded lightly.

“I understand. Then I won’t try to stop you. But if you feel like you’re in danger, run away and don’t turn back. Don’t die, Wil. Come back and help my son with his studies again.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And—”

“Yes?”

“Your blond friend seems to be quite angry, so be sure to apologize to her later. I can see that she cares for you very much; she’s a good girl, Wil. Treasure her as much as she treasures you.”

Watching Wil depart for the freight car again, Madam Epstein whispered,

“Euphemia will be in tears, won’t she?”

Her husband agreed.

“We’ll have to bring back a very big present for her.”

* * *

The supply base command center. In the room furnished with chairs and a table, the acting commander asked,

“Separating the train and heading for a village, without even permission… Are you certain?”

“I have no time to be playing games, Captain.” Major Stork replied firmly.

Next to them stood the two engineers who worked the diesel locomotive, both about forty years old. They quietly listened to the conversation.

“Let me repeat myself. We will separate the train between cars 8 and 9, and head for the village with the VIP near the front. Everyone else will wait here to be picked up.”

“But…”

“We have discussed the matter and agreed to this conclusion as a group. As the people in charge of the tour are dead, no one may veto the decision. And as for myself, my mission comes before all else. Please take care of the rest.”

“But we’ve never received such tr-”

“Please take care that you do not trigger a second Great War.”

The captain did not answer.

Major Stork turned to the engineers, who stood blankly.

“You know what to do. Get the train through the mountains at maximum speed and head for the village.”

“B-but…”

One of the engineers tried to speak, but Major Stork cut him off and added calmly,

“This is an order.”

The engineers were silenced. In the midst of the tension, a young soldier about twenty years of age entered with a kettle and teacups on a platter.

“Er… I’ve brought some tea.”

Major Stork looked at the soldier and replied, sounding strangely glad.

“Ah, thank you. But by any chance, do you have any apricot jam?”

“Pardon?”

The soldier placed the platter on a desk nearby and looked back, confused.

“Apricot jam. There’s nothing like tea with apricot jam in the morning. You don’t have a single bottle?” Major Stork asked. The captain and the engineers pretended to not be a part of the conversation, quietly pouring themselves tea. The soldier stared blankly for a moment before finally replying.

“…There’s no apricot jam on this base, sir. Not a single bottle.”

“Is that so? That’s unfortunate.”

“Oh, but we might have some blueberry jam in the fridge. We got some at breakfast this morning.” The soldier suggested. Major Stork shook his head.

“Blueberry’s better for lunch and dinner. I don’t need any at the moment.”

“Huh? Oh, right…”

“Please don’t worry about it. Now, it might be a bit of a hassle, but please get me a bottle of jam in a paper bag.”

Then, Major Stork stopped the soldier as he turned.

“By the way, where might I find the restroom? Please take me to one.”

Major Stork was led by the soldier to the officers’ restroom inside the building.

It was a narrow room, with three toilets and urinals lined up next to each other. Making sure that no one else was inside, Major Stork opened the door and called in the soldier. The soldier discreetly entered, as only officers were allowed in that restroom.

“Let me be brief. The situation is ‘Apricot Jam’.”

The soldier nodded grimly and whispered,

“Yes, sir. Do you need reinforcements?”

“No. But prepare me two or so of boxes of 50 9-millimeter rounds. The ones marked at the military supplies factory in East Iltoa. And a spare barrel, in case I need to do some cover-up work. That is all.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll have them ready shortly.”

“We are leaving the passengers behind. Should, by any chance, something happen to this base, make sure you escape even if no one else does. That is all.”

“Understood. Fortune be with you, Colonel.”

“It’s ‘Major’.”

“Excuse me.”

“I’m counting on you.”

The soldier nodded and left the restroom. Major Stork loudly thanked him for bringing toilet paper.

“Honestly, I wish for you to stay here. I am pondering if I should order you to stay here.”

Benedict and Fiona’s cabin in car 10. Benedict had packed up first, and turned to Fiona. Fiona did not turn to him as she folded her clothes beside the beds.

“I don’t care what you say—I’m coming with you. I’m staying at your side, whether it’s safe or not.”

“I am a soldier. I am somewhat adjusted to danger. Allison as well. Wil has reliable shooting skills. And he is calculating.”

“Are you trying to say that I won’t be of help? You’re right.” Fiona said, putting her clothes in her suitcase and shutting it. Then, she put her right hand over her chest and stared, her dark eyes meeting Benedict’s.

“But I’ll never abandon my family, no matter the reason.”

Benedict was silenced.

With that, Fiona struggled to hold up her suitcase and walked up to him.

“Sorry to make you wait. Shall we?”

* * *

The train was separated as the soldiers watched.

First, the engineers opened the cover over the coupling, plugged the brake hose, and separated the braking mechanism. They then cut the electric cables, put a cover over the ends, and secured them to the car so they would not dangle. They unlocked the coupling and unhooked the chain connecting the cars.

The engineer who crawled out from under the buffers turned to Major Stork.

“I’ve finished separating them.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

“I’m sorry to repeat myself again, but…”

“Yes, I understand. I will take full responsibility. Please head to the locomotive and begin the preparations. I will send you instructions later by radio. Please keep an ear out constantly.”

Once the engineers went back to the locomotive, Major Stork turned around and instructed the four people to board. Benedict first climbed up to the lounge car, which was now at the very end of the train.

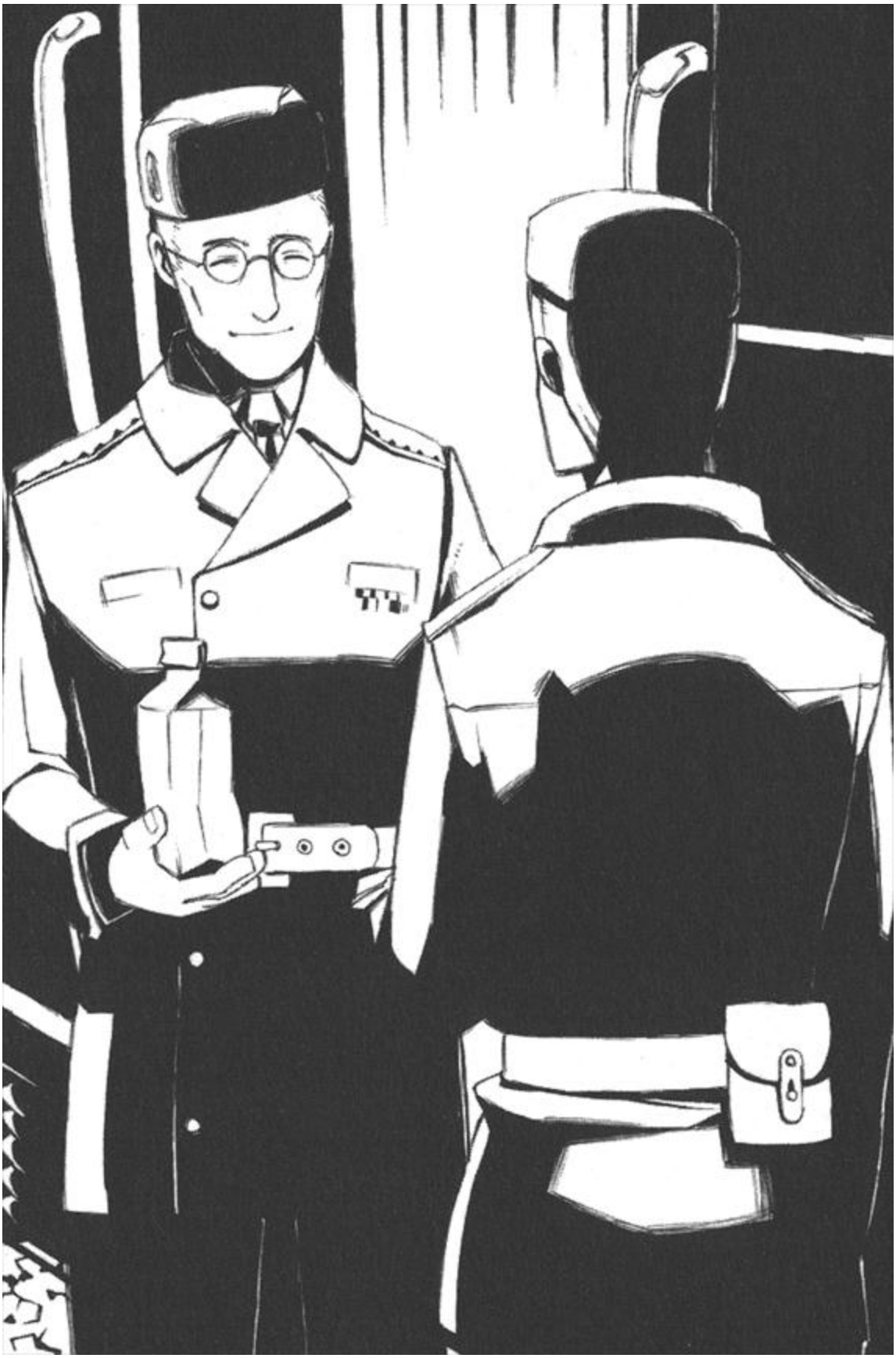
Wil followed after Fiona, but glanced back at the passenger cars. From by the windows and the cars, people watched them—some with concern and others as though urging them to leave. Wil lightly waved at the Epsteins and entered through the door. Allison lightly hopped on after him.

Major Stork excused himself to the captain standing beside him. He sounded as lighthearted as if he were going shopping for groceries.

“Take care, sir. I’d like to request that you inform the village about the broken telephone line. Thank you.”

“Understood. Please take care of the rest.”

The moment Major Stork made to board, a young soldier ran over with a twenty-centimeter by twenty-centimeter paper bag in his arms.



“The blueberry jam you asked for, sir.”

“Ah, thank you. I didn’t think you’d really bring it. I’ll have this at lunch.”

Smiling, Major Stork took the bag and disappeared inside.

There was a whistle as the diesel locomotive began spewing smoke.

The transcontinental express, now only eight cars long, slowly began to move. The soldiers, the passengers, and the crew watched the tracks until the train disappeared.

* * *

“Hahahaha! Excellent work!”

Terreur roared in laughter as he watched the scenery begin to pass outside his window. The interior of the VIP cabin was luxury incarnate. Terreur leaned all the way back on a large sofa. On the table next to him was a bottle of expensive liquor and a glass.

Ien stood beside the table. Major Stork was holding the handrail by the window.

“Ien. Tell the man ‘good work’.” Terreur said in Roxchean. His face was flushed with alcohol.

“The master has praised your actions.” Ien said tersely, indifferent.

Major Stork’s tranquil smile did not budge as he replied.

“Thank you. I caused you a moment of worry, but things are going well. I’ve informed the other allies at the supply base that things are proceeding as planned.”

Terreur looked very pleased as he spoke with Major Stork through Ien.

“After having to put on that ridiculous show, I was almost worried.”

“The Hero remains on the train to protect a wealthy man from the threats of a killer. And at his side is a future queen. Their untimely deaths will shock the world.” Major Stork said dramatically.

“That aside, what use was there in bringing the boy and the girl?”

“I was actually trying to be considerate, sir.”

“What do you mean by that?” Terreur wondered.

“The girl—is she not quite lovely? I’m giving her to you as a gift. Once things are finished, do with her as you wish. The boy happened to follow along, but it will simple to kill him when we get the chance. Or if you would prefer the boy, I’ll give you him instead.”

“Ah… Of course! Hahaha!” Hearing Ien’s interpretation, Terreur chortled. “Excellent! Stupendous! You know how customer service works!”

Major Stork smiled slightly at Terreur's unpleasant grin.

"But until then, you must not lay a hand on them. Please continue to play the role of a poor, victimized VIP."

"Of course. Ah, for your information, I have no need for the boy. Throw him off the train when you get the chance."

Nodding, Major Stork put on an unusually stiff face.

"And I have one personal request."

Terreur frowned.

"What is it?"

Major Stork bowed slightly, as though looking into Terreur and Ien's faces.

"Please allow me to kill Major Carr personally. His thoughtless actions concerning that accursed mural are unforgivable. And give me the woman. I will make her suffer as he watches before killing him. I will take both their lives with my own two hands."

After hearing Ien's interpretation, Terreur looked taken aback.

"Do as you wish."

When Ien interpreted the answer, Major Stork nodded with a word of thanks.

Terreur hissed quietly to his bodyguard, annoyed.

"What a disgusting man, so easily showing off his personal grudges."

"If you'll excuse me, I'll go and speak with Major Carr. As with before, we will deal with any unforeseen trouble. Of course, nothing will happen—but I would prefer that the two of you remain inside if at all possible."

With that, Major Stork turned—with Ien's instructions to make up excuses to the Hero behind him—and left the bodyguard lounge, going into the hallway. He was carrying his suitcase. The edge of an envelope stuck out from a slight opening.

"Phew…"

Major Stork closed his eyes and sighed. Then, he opened them again with a renewed look as he left for the dining cars. Soon, he passed the coupling and arrived at the galley hallway.

"Oscar Whittington… did you place a curse on me as you died? A curse where everything that could possibly go wrong goes wrong? Is this your revenge?"

The man in the Royal Army uniform whispered under his breath as he walked down the long hallway.

"Very well. I will fight your vengeance. I will pay back your revenge double."

* * *

The supply base.

Once the front of the transcontinental express had departed, the luxurious cars left behind created a rather odd atmosphere amidst its surroundings. The soldiers were hesitant to approach the cars, and the passengers remained holed up in their rooms with the curtains closed.

Out of nowhere, the roar of an engine echoed from the sky. A small observation aircraft with the mark of the Royal Army, not the Air Force, circled the hollow as it descended. The craft was like an aquarium, with the front made of glass. Three people sat there in a line.

As the soldiers watched, the craft used the concrete pavement parallel to the tracks as a runway as it easily landed.

Leaving the pilot in the plane, two officers from the Royal Army disembarked, taking off their thick coats. They were both young officers—first lieutenants in their twenties.

And both wore armbands with the words 'Military Police'. The military police was a police force within the military that dealt with internal crimes and exposed breaches of conduct. That was why their presence was never welcomed. To be more accurate, they were outright hated by the rest of the military.

"It's just one guest after another today…" The acting commander sighed, but he quickly composed himself and greeted the visitors. He then led them to the command center.

The two officers remained stoic even after exchanging greetings. Once inside, they declined the offer of chairs and demanded an explanation about the passenger cars. The captain clarified the situation, mentioning Major Stork by name. The officers exchanged glances. They asked several times if the major really was named 'Stork'. The captain said that he was.

"If only you had come a little earlier. In any case, what business do you have here?"

The two officers mechanically replied that their duties were confidential. They stood and picked up the coats they had hung over the backs of the chairs.

"If nothing else, could you contact the village and tell them that our telephone is out?"

The officers replied that they could not do so due to their duties, and began heading for the door.

"O-one moment, please!"

A soldier about twenty years of age, who was holding a platter, loudly called to the officers. They turned.

"I've brought some tea…" The soldier trailed off. The officers looked annoyed by the mere fact that they had to respond.

“No thank you.”

In the little kitchen in a corner of the command center, the young soldier threw out the tea and began washing the cups. Suddenly, he heard the sound of an engine. Outside the window, the observation craft took easily to the air.

“The military police…”

The soldier stopped and looked at them, irritated.

“Never thought we’d get military police all the way out here. This isn’t good.”

The craft soon disappeared out of the frame.

In the sky over the base. Inside the observation craft, one of the first lieutenants turned to his friend behind him, and whispered so the pilot could not hear.

“What in the world is he planning? They weren’t scheduled to stop by the depot.”

“I don’t know.” The other officer replied, bitterly shaking his head.

“Not only did they separate the train, but they’re also traveling ahead of schedule. What’s going on here?”

“Who knows? We’ll just have to ask the man himself later… but it’s a good thing there’s fewer people on board now. Now we’ll be able to take over much more easily. After all, we have to make certain the target ‘dies’.”

“Yes… you’re right.”

“Anyway, we’ll be late if we don’t wake everyone up now. If the train makes it down the mountain, all our efforts are going to have been a waste.”

The observation craft ascended as it headed west.

-**To be continued in Part 2**-